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Relevance in Robyn Carston's Pragmatics: Use or Misuse?

Introduction

Postulating the non-conceptual, non-semantic, schematic and non-determinate nature of word meaning (Carston 2012, 2013) seems to diverge from the first subtask of the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure (Sperber and Wilson 1986[1995], 2004). Where there is an absence of conceptual word meaning, decoding cannot result in concept-dependent logical forms which, consequently, cannot be developed into conceptual, propositional explicatures, reflecting a speaker's thoughts, as predicted by relevance theory.

In her attempt at generalizing the underdeterminacy thesis[1] (Carston 2002, 2010) from thoughts/utterances to concepts/words, Carston (2012, 2013 184) suggests that the stable word meaning of nouns, verbs and adjectives is non-conceptual, non-semantic, schematic and non-determinate.

> [...] an account of word meanings as non-conceptual (semantically underspecified) would be the completing component of this view of the relation between language and thought: not only do sentence meanings underdetermine thoughts, but the basic constituents of sentences (words) underdetermine the basic constituents of thoughts (concepts). If the account turns out to be right, it's not just that we don't always say what we intend our hearers to take us to mean but that it is simply not possible to say what we mean (Carston 2013, 203),

which is a direct commitment to the ineffability thesis.[2] Carston (2013, 198-199) states that "This non-conceptual view of word meaning is compatible with RT".

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[1] Underdeterminacy thesis: "The meaning encoded in the linguistic expression type that a speaker utters inevitably underdetermines the content that the communicator [conveys], not only her implicatures but also the propositional content she communicates explicitly ('explicature')" (Carston 2010, 4, 2002).

[2] Ineffability thesis: "There are always components of a speaker's meaning which the linguistic expressions she employs do not encode" (Carston 2013, 202), which is the opposite of the effability thesis: "[...] all our thoughts are explicitly expressible, in which case for every thought there is at least one sentence that would express it explicitly" (Bach 2010, 129).

In relevance theory, the underdeterminacy thesis is assumed, yet the extreme point of literal – non-literal communication allows for literal talk; if that is required and predicted by the two principles of relevance and the definitions of (optimal) relevance. Consequently, there exists the possibility of saying what we mean, falsifying the ineffability thesis but without, however, accepting the effability view.[3]

Apart from this difference, the divergence of Carston's (2012, 2013) new view of word meaning from RT basic assumptions seems to concern the first subtask of the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure which entails

> Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes. (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 615).

More specifically, the differences concern the nature of decoding, the interpretation of logical form and its development, an understanding of ad hoc concepts and the meaning of explicatures. In Carston's pragmatics these notions would have to be redefined. Before this is done, Carston's pragmatic interpretation of lexical meaning is parallel to but not compatible with relevance-theoretic lexical pragmatics.

1. Constitutive factors of utterance comprehension in Relevance Theory

The fundamental tenets of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95, Wilson and Sperber 2004) are its two principles, the notions of relevance and optimal relevance and the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure.

The two Principles of Relevance are as follows:

> The Cognitive Principle of Relevance: human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 610).
> The Communicative Principle of Relevance: Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 612).

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[3] Since, in fact, all utterances are enriched during the process of LF development in RT, one might claim that the very fact of enrichment 'rules out' the possibility of literal interpretation. However, the outcome of the enrichment may be that no ad hoc concepts need to be constructed because recovering the lexicalized encoded concepts present in LF are sufficient to satisfy the hearer's expectations of relevance, as predicted by the two principles of the theory.

The notion of relevance:

> The relevance of an input is defined as a) Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. b) Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 609).

The notion of optimal relevance:

> The presumption of optimal relevance: a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort. b) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 612).

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

> Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure: a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects. Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolution, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned) (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 613). Subtasks in the overall comprehension process: a. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes. b. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPICATED PREMISES). c. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS) (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 615).

These are the fundamental assumptions of relevance theory. They are recalled here because any change in any of them would entail reconstructing the theory itself. For example, in Carston's pragmatics the first subtask of relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure would have to be reconsidered. As a consequence of this reconsideration, the theory itself would have to be modified.

2. Robyn Carston's (2013, 2012) pragmatics

The main tenets of Robyn Carston's (2012, 2013) pragmatics, concerning the stable/standing meaning of three open-class items, that is nouns, verbs and adjectives are as follows (Mioduszewska 2015, 6-7):

(a) Stable (lexicalized) word meanings are non-conceptual, that is non-semantic (Carston 2013, 184). Words do not encode full-fledged concepts; in fact, there is no literal, encoded meaning of lexical items (Carston 2013, 200). As in relevance-theoretic lexical pragmatics, words are merely pointers to or evidence for a speaker's meaning.

(b) "Each word comes with its own distinct but schematic meaning, which functions as a constraint on the general pragmatic process of

accessing or constructing a concept, a process which is wholly motivated by the goal of the pragmatic system which is to deliver speaker meaning." (Carston 2013, 200) The problem lies with the lexical concept that comprises the stable meaning of a word whose use gives rise to a range of distinct ad hoc concepts. For example, is there any definite thought at all that engages the general concept encoded by the verb *open* (Carston 2012, 2013, 185), covering all its distinct senses (*open the door*, *open one's mouth*, *open a meeting*…)? Perhaps it is better "to move to a different non-conceptual (non-semantic) view on the nature of standing word meaning." (Carston 2013, 185)

(c) In view of the schematic, non-conceptual stable meaning of open-class words, the pragmatic inferential process of constructing (contextual) ad hoc concepts becomes obligatory (Carston 2013, 187). This process allows for only one of a range of concepts to be the first one accessed or constructed, as determined by the considerations of relevance.

(d) Word meanings are conceptually underspecified (Carston 2013, 184, 187, 196, 197, 201).[4]

(e) Meaning ≠ sense. An open-class item's meaning is the underspecified, non-conceptual, non-semantic standing meaning of a word. Open-class items senses are fully conceptual semantic entities that words are used to express by individual language users in their individual utterances. Speakers express fully semantic entities, that is concepts, components of the thoughts/propositions expressed (Carston 2013, 201).[5]

(f) This non-conceptual view of word meaning is compatible with RT.[6] According to Robyn Carston, her interpretation of standing word meaning has some cognitive and theoretical advantages. On the processing effort side, "rather than activating one or more specific senses, readers initially activate a single, semantically underspecified meaning.

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[4] Proof of the underdeterminacy of standing word meaning comes from an analysis of polysemy (Bosch 2009) and its cognitive foundations (Frisson 2009) and is endorsed by Carston. Since all open-class words are (potentially) polysemous (Carston 2013, 192), their meaning is underspecified, too. For the needs of the paper, the validity of the reasoning is irrelevant, as what is examined is the (in)compatibility of Carston's view with the general RT assumptions.

[5] External support for this position comes, for example, from Bosch (2009, 99) in Carston (2013, 185) "Lexical semantics is much less specified than is often assumed and only contains structural constraints over the kind of conceptual entities that can be denoted by the lexical item, but does not contain the conceptual content."

[6] To support this claim, Carston (2013, 198-199) discusses Wilson's (2011) proposal that all words encode a procedural meaning while open classes also encode concepts, advocating her own view.

This abstract meaning is the same for the established senses of a word, that is, the same underspecified meaning encompasses all semantically related interpretations of a word that are known to a reader." (Frisson 2009, 116 in Carston 2013, 191-192)

On this account, there is no need to explicate the nature and functioning of full-fledged concepts. On the other hand, an explanation is offered of the fact that bundles of related senses (polysemy) seem to accrue around a word form (Carston 2013, 200).

The account poses some problems too. How, for example, do we get from non-conceptual, non-semantic word meaning to semantic, truth-conditional and conceptual word senses (Carston, 2013, 187, 195 note 20). Another problem concerns the organization and tagging of encyclopaedic information (Carston, 2013, 180).

A lot more needs to be said about the nature and functioning of postulated non-conceptual, non-truth-conditional but word invariant concept schemas so as to make them cognitively and operationally transparent. Similarly, the status and properties of full-fledged mental concepts cannot be left unexplained because, although they are no longer needed as word meanings, they remain constitutive components of speakers' thoughts (propositions expressed), which are the meaning of explicatures. Since thoughts are fully propositional, semantic, conceptual and truth-conditional, Fodor's (1998) requirement of semantic compositionality, according to Carston no longer valid for language meaning in her pragmatics, seems to remain necessary for the language of thought. This aspect has not been elucidated in the presented account.

3. (In) Compatibility of Robyn Carston's pragmatics with Relevance Theory?

In accordance with the canonical RT view on lexical meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1986[1985]), word meanings are concepts which have lexical, logical and encyclopaedic entries, leading to different types of knowledge representations. After Fodor (1975, 2010), concepts possess referential semantics with denotations. They refer to entities, properties and activities in the mind-external world.

This slightly oversimplified view becomes more complicated in relevance-theoretic lexical pragmatics (Wilson 2003; Wilson and Carston 2007; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Carston 2009; Wilson 2011). Encoded word meaning becomes more heterogeneous and it includes not only

concepts, pro-concepts and procedures but it also provides input for constructing or retrieving ad hoc concepts. Word meanings constitute clues or evidence guiding or constraining the processes of pragmatic inference in utterance interpretation.

In Carston's (2012, 2013) pragmatics, stable lexicalized word meaning is non-conceptual and non-semantic, which results in the fact that "there is no literal, encoded meaning of lexical items" (Carston 2013, 200, 184). Words, having a distinct, schematic meaning, are constraints on the obligatory pragmatic inferential process of ad hoc concepts construction (Carston 2013, 187).

As a consequence of these assumptions, word meanings are conceptually underspecified (Carston 2013, 184, 187, 196, 197, 201) although their individual, non-conceptual, schematic meaning is stable and distinct. On individual occasions of use, the meaning may acquire an array of different senses. According to Carston (2013, 198-199), "This non-conceptual view of word meaning[7] is compatible with relevance theory."

In RT, decoding is an automatic, peripheral mental process. It results in the emergence of logical form (LF), which is a structured string of atomic concepts, comprising the semantically/linguistically encoded meaning. In Carston's pragmatics, the decoding process cannot result in a conceptual structure for lack of lexicalized concepts. It seems unclear what the result of decoding would be on this view because accessing the schematic, non-conceptual, non-semantic word meaning before it acquires its occasion specific conceptual sense in the process of pragmatic inference would not be justified by the expectation of optimal relevance of the ostensive stimulus, that is the produced utterance.

Within relevance theory, logical forms, which are structured strings of concepts resulting from the automatic decoding process, contain, among other entities such as pro-concepts, at least some concepts understood as "enduring, elementary mental structures, capable of playing different discriminatory or inferential roles on different occasions in an individual's mental life" (Sperber and Wilson 1998[2012, 35]).

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[7] The problems inherent in such view of word meaning, some of which are recognized by Carston herself, may be grasped in the following questions: 1. How to get from non-conceptual, non-semantic word meaning to semantic, truth-conditional and conceptual word senses? (Carston 2013, 187, 195 note 20) 2. How to organize and tag encyclopaedic information? (Carston 2013, 180) 3. What is the nature and functioning of non-conceptual, non-truth-conditional but word invariant concept schemas? 4. What is the status and properties of full-fledged mental concepts which are constitutive components of a speaker's thoughts, and which, in turn, constitute the meaning of explicatures?

Such an interpretation of LF is inadmissible in Carston's pragmatics as there are no stable lexicalized mental concepts, with ad hoc concepts being the result of the inferential pragmatic processes and not of decoding. Instead, one might argue that the result of decoding is not a structured string of concepts but a structured string of templates or meaning schemas (or an array of activated encyclopaedic information). If so, the nature of the schemas would have to be clarified in such a way that their logical and denotational properties are determinable and expressible.

In relevance theory, logical forms undergo a process of logical form development as predicted by the first subtask of the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

> [...] the hearer takes the conceptual structure constructed by linguistic decoding (logical form), [...] he enriches this on the explicit level and complements it at the implicit level (guided by the cognitive principle of relevance) (Sperber and Wilson 1998[2012, 39]),

with the optional pragmatic process of ad hoc concepts[8] construction or retrieval. In Carston's framework ad hoc concept construction must be obligatory since pragmatic enrichment processes have no other conceptual input which they could operate on.

In RT, ad hoc concept construction or retrieval occurs if it is required by a search for relevance as guided by the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance grounded in its definition and as predicted by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure. Ad hoc concepts are arrived at through the mutual pragmatic adjustment of explicatures, for the construction of which lexicalized concepts constitute a necessary clue, and contextual implications. In this account, ad hoc concepts are in fact practically omnipresent, but their construction and/or retrieval is theoretically optional because it depends on the search for relevance and is not a requirement of the theory itself. The latter case occurs in Carston's pragmatics, in which ad hoc concepts are the only concepts in the comprehension process as the standing word meaning is non-conceptual and schematic. It follows that the ad hoc concept construction from the invariant, non-semantic word meaning is obligatory though as yet unexplained for lack of a closer interpretation of standing word meaning. Until such an interpretation is given, it is difficult to speculate

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[8] Ad hoc concepts are "pragmatically derived, generally ineffable, not lexicalized [...]" (Carston 2010, 13) concepts that can be constructed or retrieved.

on the meaning of ad hoc concepts if by it we would want to take their denotation. In RT, the meaning of a concept is its denotation and a set of meaning constitutive inference rules accessible via the concept's logical entry activated by the word serving as a pointer to the concept (Mioduszewska 2015: 12-13). In the case of ad hoc concepts in the relevance-theoretic lexical pragmatics, their denotation is the narrowed and/or broadened denotation of a concept encoded by the word providing the evidential input to the ad hoc concept's derivation. In Carston's pragmatics, ad hoc concept denotations cannot be established in this way because there are no lexicalized encoded concepts, related to ad hoc concepts, on whose denotations the latter would base. The denotations of such new ad hoc concepts could hardly be determinable for the lack of grounding in a lexicalized concept meaning. The denotational status of non-conceptual, invariant, schematic word meaning has not been clarified. Consequently, the denotation, that is the meaning of such new ad hoc concepts is neither predictable nor easily, if at all, determinable.

Since the interpretation of explicatures and, more generally, of explicit content, and derivatively of the explicit/implicit meaning distinction is theory relative (compare, for example Bach 2010 and Carston 2009), one might expect another area of potential incompatibility here between relevance theory and Carston's pragmatics, arising from the different interpretations of the nature of word meaning, decoding, logical form, logical form development and ad hoc concepts.

In relevance theory, explicature meaning is the meaning of a speaker's thought expressed in the utterance and interpreted as the outcome of the utterance's logical form development. It is propositional[9] and hence truth-conditional in character. In Carston's pragmatics, such an operational definition is inadmissible for lack of logical forms that could undergo development. Neither can there be a truth-conditional propositional interpretation of explicature meaning: there is no grounding for its truth-conditional character because of indeterminate denotations of ad hoc concepts. How then explicatures could come to express determinate, conceptual, semantic, truth-conditional and truth-evaluable propositions with no conceptual input to occasion-specific ad hoc concept construction, which results in their denotational and

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[9] Originally, the explicature's propositional form was defined by Carston (1991: 49) as "a well-formed formula which (a) undergoes formal logical operations determined by its structure and (b) is semantically complete in that it is capable of being true or false."

inferential meaning being not determinate is a problem that needs further explanation in Carston's pragmatics. Until then, Carston's new proposal seems to diverge from the relevance theory first subtask of the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure.

An analysis of a prototypical category extension example summarizes the differences between the two approaches.

Example
Context: Two acquaintances A and B are talking about John's professional skills.
Is John a good surgeon?
He is a butcher.
[John is a bad surgeon][10]

Within RT, A's interpretation of B's utterance is guided by A's search for confirmation of her expectation of relevance. In the process, following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, the automatic decoding of *He is a butcher* renders BUTCHER[11] (John) from the mapping from the word *butcher* to the lexicalized concept BUTCHER. Since A's expectation of relevance is not met, an individual-relative pragmatic adjustment takes place. Since BUTCHER[John earns money working as a butcher] is not relevant enough, an ad hoc concept BUTCHER* is constructed through the mutual pragmatic adjustment of potential explicature and contextual implications, resulting in an explicature [John is a bad surgeon], the relevance of which for A is confirmed and the processing stops.[12]

Such a relevance theory based comprehension process of *He is a butcher* is inadmissible in Robyn Carston's pragmatics because there is no conceptual logical form available. There is no lexicalized mental atomic concept BUTCHER as there is no word-concept mapping. The ad hoc concept BUTCHER*, related to BUTCHER by category extension and/or narrowing cannot be postulated for the same reasons, either.

Due to lack of detailed interpretations for invariant, non-conceptual standing word meaning and for the meaning and status of postulated ad hoc concepts, a simulation of the utterance understanding process in terms of Carston's pragmatics would be unjustifiably speculative.

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[10]Square brackets mark explicatures.
[11]Capital letters mark concepts.
[12]In view of the ongoing discussion on the metaphorical category extension interpretation in RT, the presented version is to show the simplest possibility of relevance-theoretic account of such cases.

Conclusions

In relevance theory, the automatic decoding process results in a tacit recovery of a logical form (LF). Logical forms are structured strings of atomic concepts. In Carston's pragmatics, logical forms are non-entities for the lack of lexicalized concepts. In RT "[...] the hearer takes the conceptual structure constructed by the linguistic decoding (logical form), [...] he enriches this on the explicit level and complements it on the implicit level [...]" (Sperber and Wilson 1998[2012, 39]), with the ad hoc concept construction being an optional process. In Carston's pragmatics, the process is obligatory due to the lack of a conceptual input to the enrichment processes. In RT, explicature meaning is the meaning of a speaker's thought expressed in their utterance, inferred as an outcome of the utterance's logical form development. Since in Carston's pragmatics there are no conceptual logical forms and, thus, no logical form development, an understanding of explicatures needs further interpretation. Given these considerations, we may say that the deconstruction of linguistically/semantically encoded meaning seems to deconstruct some basic tenets of relevance theory.

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Summary

In an attempt at a generalization of the Underdeterminacy Thesis (Carston 2002) from thoughts/utterances to concepts/words (Carston 2012, 2013), Carston (2013:184) claims that the stable word meaning of nouns, verbs and adjectives is non-conceptual, non-semantic, schematic and non-determinate. Carston (2013, 198-199) states that "This non-conceptual view of word meaning is compatible with RT." This view of word meaning raises questions about its compatibility with RT basic assumptions concerning (1) the nature of decoding, (2) the interpretation of logical form and its development, (3) the interpretation of mental ad hoc concepts, and (4) the interpretation of explicature meaning.

In RT, the automatic decoding process results in the tacit recovery of a logical form (LF). Logical forms are structured strings of atomic concepts. In Carston's pragmatics, LFs are non-entities due to the lack of lexicalized concepts. In RT "[...] the hearer takes the conceptual structure constructed by linguistic decoding (logical form), [...] he enriches this on the explicit level and complements it at the implicit level [...]." (Sperber and Wilson 1998[2012, 39]), with ad hoc concept construction being an optional process. In Carston's pragmatics, the process is obligatory, and this arises from the lack of a conceptual input to enrichment processes. In RT, explicature meaning is the meaning of a speaker's thought expressed in their utterance inferred as an outcome of the utterance's logical form development. Since in Carston's pragmatics there are no conceptual logical forms and, thus no logical form development, there can hardly be explicatures in RT terms. The deconstruction of linguistically/semantically encoded meaning within relevance theory suggests a path to the reconstruction of the theory itself.

Keywords: relevance theory, Robyn Carston's pragmatics, word meaning, concepts, lexical pragmatics