Issues in Pragmatics

PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 1: Semantics and Pragmatics – The Gricean View

Course Aims

Over the next ten weeks, we will look at a problem concerning the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. The problem arises as a consequence of a certain phenomenon, known as *linguistic underdeterminacy*: put roughly, the underdetermination of truth-conditions by encoded meaning. We'll look at the problem and some responses to it in some detail. This week, we begin by introducing the problem and the classical solution to it, deriving from the philosopher Paul Grice's theory of conversation.

Lecture Schedule

1. Semantics and Pragmatics – The Gricean View
2. Linguistic Underdeterminacy
3. Contextualism Introduced
4. The Experimental Data
5. Varieties of Contextualism
6. Speaker Intentions and the Role of Context
7. Recanati's Contextualism and Relevance Theory
8. Compositionality and Stanley's Challenge
9. Alternatives: Indexicalism and Minimalism
10. Alternatives: Relativism and Nonindexical Contextualism

Assessment

2 x 2,000 word essay (BA students) or 1 x 3,000 word essay (MA students).

1. Semantics and Pragmatics

So what is the problem? Taking both to lie within cognitive science, broadly construed, it is not difficult to characterise the distinctive aims of semantics and pragmatics:

Semantics studies the tacit knowledge employed in pairing expressions with meanings.
Pragmatics studies how we interpret utterances of sentences and other expressions.

- Semantics is concerned with expressions, pragmatics with utterances.
- Semantics is concerned with linguistic competence, pragmatics with performance.

The problem arises out of the dominant *truth-conditional* conception of semantics.

2. Truth-Conditional Semantics

> To know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-condition.
>
> (Heim and Kratzer 1998, p. 1)

On this conception, semantic theories explain how the truth values of sentences are determined in accordance with their composition. The meaning of an expression is what it contributes to the truth conditions of sentences of which it is a constituent part.

An Extremely Simple Example

- 'John' refers to John
- 'smokes' is true of an object x IFF (if and only if) x smokes
- $[_S[_{NP}\mathbf{NP}][_{VP}\mathbf{VP}]$ is true IFF **VP** is true of what **NP** refers to

This assigns as semantic value John to 'John', the set of smokers to 'smokes', and so (by way of a rule of composition) predicts that 'John smokes' is true IFF John smokes.

An Initial Problem

> **Case 1** Anna is having dinner with Brenda. Anna has a job interview tomorrow, and wants to go to sleep soon. Brenda asks if she would like some coffee. Anna says: 'Coffee would keep me awake'.
>
> Anna communicates that she would *not* like some coffee.
>
> **Case 2.** Anna is having dinner with Brenda. Anna has to finish an important essay, and will need to stay up late. Brenda asks if she would like some coffee. Anna says: 'Coffee would keep me awake'.
>
> Anna communicates that she *would* like some coffee.
>
> (Example adapted from Sperber and Wilson 1995, p. 11)

Here, one and the same sentence is used to communicate different propositions on different occasions. More generally, it seems that, given an appropriate context, a sentence can be used to communicate almost *anything*. Unless we can treat these propositions as somehow irrelevant to semantics, we might worry that there is nothing interesting to be said about the connection between meaning and truth — at least, nothing that requires us to say anything interesting about the meanings of particular expressions.

What we need, then, is a way of distinguishing among the propositions associated with the utterance of a sentence those that are semantically relevant from those that are not.

3. Grice's Theory of Conversation

Grice (1989) offers an account of how certain of the propositions communicated by an utterance, the *conversational implicatures*, can be derived from the speaker's saying what she does, facts about the context, and general principles governing conversation. (See appendix A for details.) This might be regarded as a psychological model of interpretation (though Grice himself thought of it as a rational reconstruction of interpretation). More importantly, for our purposes, it can be understood as an account of the distinction between the semantically relevant proposition(s) associated with a sentence (what a speaker says) and the rest, and so as a potential solution to our initial problem.

Some issues:

- What a speaker says is not always a part of what she communicates.
  Irony, metaphor, — metonymy?, hyperbole?
- Encoded meaning seems to contribute to more than what is said.
  'The plumber, who lives next door, fixed it', 'That damn tap is leaking again.'

4. Linguistic Underdetermination of What Is Said

What is said with a sentence also varies with context. Consider the following:

(1) Coffee would keep me awake [reference of the indexical]

(2) The banks have collapsed [lexical ambiguity]

(3) Rowan saw Jo with a pair of binoculars [structural ambiguity]

(4) Paracetemol is better [than what?]

(5) It's the same [as what? in which respect(s)?]

(6) Rowan is leaving [what?]

(7) That is enough [of what?]

(8) It is raining [where?]

(9) Jo is tall [which comparison class?]

(10) This leaf is green [which part?]

(11) That is a problem [relative to what?]

(12) Rowan is bald [vagueness]

(13) In the middle cupboard [sub-sentential]

There is a further problem here, but it is not the contextual variation of what is said in and of itself. Semanticists have developed various tools for handling context sensitivity.

Another Simple Example

- If the speaker in a context c is x then: 'I' refers to x, relative to c
- 'smoke' is true, relative to a context c, of an object x IFF (if and only if) x smokes
- $[_S[_{NP}\mathbf{NP}][_{VP}\mathbf{VP}]$ is true, relative to a context c, IFF **VP** is true, relative to c, of what **NP** refers to, relative to c

Expressions are assigned extensions *relative to contexts*. (For our purposes: the reference of an NP is the thing it refers to, and the reference of a VP is the set of things it is true of.) The prediction is that, if the speaker in a context c is x, the sentence 'I smoke' is true, relative to c, IFF x smokes.

The Division of Labour Problem

Rather, the problem concerns the division of labour involved in determining what is said. The fact that what is said can vary with context shows that the pragmatic process of determining what a speaker says often (perhaps always?) involves *more* than simply decoding the encoded meaning of the expressions used. In some cases, the further processing seems to be *mandated* by the encoded meaning of the sentence. For example, in (1) we need to identify who is speaking, while in (4) we need to identify what paracetemol is being compared to[1]. In other cases, however, the situation is not so clear-cut.

Consider 'Everyone isn't hungry' (Carston 2002, p. 25). This has two readings: 'not everyone is hungry' and 'no one is hungry'. These can be explained in various ways, however. One option is that both scopal possibilities are encoded. Another is that only

[1]There is disagreement about this. In his (1994) Kent Bach argues that what is said with sentences like (4) is not fully propositional. On this view, we need to identify what paracetemol is being compared to in order to determine what Bach calls the conversational *impliciture*, but not to determine what is said.

one is encoded, the first say, and that the other arises in context as the result of a non-mandatory pragmatic process of logical strengthening. Yet another possibility is that neither possibility is encoded. Similarly, consider "trivial truths": sentences like 'Fixing the TV will take some time'. One option is that trivial and informative readings are determined by the encoded meaning as a function of context. (Perhaps, 'some time' picks out lengths of time greater than some contextually specified length: in contexts in which it is used to say something trivial, it picks out lengths of time greater than zero.) Another is that the encoded meaning determines only a trivial reading, which is modified in context. Yet another option is that the encoded meaning determines neither.

These sorts of cases cast some of the above examples in a new light. Consider (10). Does the encoded meaning determine each reading as a function of context? Or is there one privileged reading that is encoded and is sometimes modified in context? Or are none of the readings encoded? The choice we make impacts on our account of the encoded meaning of the sentence, and the predicate 'is green' in particular. On the first option, the encoded meaning of the predicate determines a function from contexts to sets. (But which function?) On the second, it simply determines a set. (But which set?) On the third, it is ... well what exactly? This problem will be in the background throughout.

Depending on how we answer the division of labour problem, we may also run into the initial problem all over again. Suppose, for example, we say that the encoded meaning of the sentence 'Everyone isn't hungry' encodes the reading on which negation takes wide scope, and that the other reading arises in context as the result of a non-mandatory pragmatic process of strengthening. Then either (i) we say that the latter reading is something that the sentence can be used to somehow *imply* (how?) but not something it can ever be used to *say or* (ii) we allow that it is something that the sentence can be used to say, but that the notion of what is said doesn't pick out the semantically relevant propositions associated sentences after all. But then we are back where we began: how are we to distinguish the semantically relevant propositions associated with a sentence?

5. Summary

- Linguistic meaning underdetermines what is communicated.
- The distinction between what is said and what is implicated.
- Linguistic meaning also underdetermines what is said.
- The division of labour: decoding encoded meaning and other processes.
- Linguistically mandated and other processes.

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read chapters 2 and 3 of (Grice 1989).

Questions

1. Try to come up with some examples illustrating Grice's distinction between what is said and what is implicated. Try to show how the implicatures in your examples could be derived from what is said (or the speaker's saying it) by means of Grice's Cooperative Principle and the various maxims.

2. We looked at some cases that seem to show that 'This leaf is green' can be used to say different things about the same leaf on different occasions (Travis 1997):

   Case 1 The leaves on Pia's maple tree are normally red, but she has painted them green. Sid needs a green leaf for a photo shoot, and asks Pia if she has any. She offers a leaf from her maple tree, and says: 'This leaf is green'.

   Case 2 The leaves on Pia's maple tree are normally red, but she has painted them green. Sid needs a green leaf for a photosynthesis experiment, and asks Pia if she has any. She offers a leaf from her maple tree, and says: 'This leaf is green'.

   We might try to account for this by saying that the predicate 'is green' is used to say something about different *parts* of an object in different contexts, and that while Pia is talking about the outsides of the maple leaf in case 1, she is talking about their insides in case 2.

   Can you think of a pair of cases that make trouble for this hypothesis? [Hint: choose a pair of cases in which Pia is talking about the *same* parts of the same object on both occasions.]

3. Can you come up with any examples of sentences that *cannot* be used to say different things on different occasions?

References

Bach, K. (1994) 'Conversational Impliciture' *Mind & Language* **9** (2) pp. 124–162.

Carston, R. (2002) *Thoughts and Utterances* (Blackwell).

Grice, P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Heim, I. and Kratzer, A. (1998) *Semantics in Generative Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1995) *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell) 2nd edn.

Travis, C. (1997) 'Pragmatics' in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell) pp. 89–107.

A. The Cooperative Principle and its Maxims

> **The Cooperative Principle**
>
> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Under this, Grice distinguishes four categories of maxims and submaxims:

1. **Quantity**

   Make your contribution as informative as is required.

   Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

2. **Quality**

   Try to make your contribution one that is true.

   a) Do not say what you believe to be false.

   b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. **Relation**

   Be relevant.

4. **Manner**

   Be perspicuous.

   a) Avoid obscurity of expression.

   b) Avoid ambiguity.

   c) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

   d) Be orderly.

Conversational implicatures are generated when a speaker's saying what she says (in the way that she does) constitutes a *flouting* of (blatant failure to fulfil) maxims. Put roughly: in such a case, the conversational implicatures are the propositions that one needs to assume the speaker is trying to communicate in order to reconcile the fact that she said what she did with the assumption that she is, in fact, observing the maxims.

An Example

Consider case 1. Anna *says* that coffee would keep her awake. This doesn't answer Brenda's question, so constitutes a flouting of the maxim of Relation. If Anna is being cooperative, the answer follows from what she says and a piece of common knowledge: Anna wants to sleep soon, and so would not like anything that will keep her awake.