Issues in Pragmatics
PLIN3001 – PLING204

Jonny McIntosh

jonathon.mcintosh@ucl.ac.uk

Lecture 2: Linguistic Underdetermination

Recap and Overview

Last week, we looked at the problem of the semantics/pragmatics distinction and the classical Gricean solution to it: the distinction between what is said and the rest of what is communicated. We saw that various *theses of underdetermination* seem to hold:

- Linguistic meaning underdetermines what a speaker means or communicates.

- What a speaker says underdetermines what a speaker means or communicates.

- Linguistic meaning underdetermines what a speaker says.

Our main focus is on the third thesis, the thesis that the encoded meaning of a sentence underdetermines what a sentence can be used to say. Following (Carston 2002, p. 19), call this *the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis*. As we will see in future weeks, not everyone accepts the thesis, and among those who do there is disagreement about the *extent* to which encoded meaning underdetermines what is said, but we saw in last week's lecture and in the back-up tutorials that the encoded meanings of a whole host of different sentences at least *seem* to underdetermine what those sentences can be used to say in myriad different ways. This week we will look at the thesis itself in a bit more detail, and consider the various kinds of pragmatic processes that might be involved in bridging the gap between the encoded meaning of a sentence and what it is used to say.

(Note: I mentioned at the end of last week's lecture that contextual variation in the truth-conditions of what is said is not in-and-of-itself a problem for the truth-conditional conception of semantics — theorists have developed a range of tools for accounting for contextual variation in sentence's truth-conditions — but that there is a problem in the offing. There's some discussion of it in the handout for last week, but it will be useful to set it aside for now and return to it later after we've got a few more pieces in play.)

1 Linguistic Underdetermination

To fix on the extent to which encoded meaning seems to underdetermine what is said, consider the range of things that can intuitively be said with the following sentence:

(1) She has cut it enough now

How do these go beyond or differ from the sentence's encoded or linguistic meaning?

- Indexicals and demonstratives ('she', 'it', 'now')
  Who has cut *what* enough *when*?

- Incomplete expressions ('enough')
  Enough *for* what? *Often* enough? *Short* enough?

- Polysemy/underspecification ('cut')
  Compare: cutting grass, hair, cake, fingers, a lecture?

(We can begin to see the problem: is all this to be accounted for by a semantic theory? If not, how are we to draw a principled distinction between what is and what isn't?)

Is this underdetermination (apparently of what the speaker says, but certainly of what the speaker means) an effort saving convenience or is it essential to natural language?

The Convenience View

According to **the convenience view**, endorsed by Quine, Katz, and Bach, although the encoded meaning of a sentence typically underdetermines what it is used to say, this is only because using it saves us effort in communication: we could in principle use a sentence whose encoded meaning does *not* underdetermine what it is used to say.

On this view, for each proposition, there is an **eternal sentence** encoding that proposition, i.e. a sentence that can be used to express that proposition no matter the context. Possible examples of eternal sentences: "2+2=4", "vixens are female foxes", "snow is white". (Can you think of examples showing that these are *not* eternal sentences?)

Perhaps, for anything we might say, we can always find sentences which express that proposition *more* explicitly than the one we used — heading off more and more possible misinterpretations. But can we always (ever) find one that is *fully* explicit?

- Worries about eternal reference: contrast between the names and definite descriptions of natural language and the constants of formal languages.

- Worries about eternal predication: the encoded meaning of 'cut grass enough', 'cut grass often enough', 'cut grass with a lawnmower often enough'.

The Essentialist View

In opposition to the convenience view, we can distinguish weaker and stronger claims:

- There are very few, if any, eternal sentences in natural languages.

- **Essentialism**: linguistic underdeterminacy is essential to natural language.

For further discussion and references, see (Bach 2010), who endorses the convenience view, and (Recanati 1994) and (Carston 2002, esp. §1.3), who endorse essentialism.

2 Pragmatic Processes

Determination

If encoded meaning doesn't (ever?) determine what is said, then what does?

- the speaker's (communicative) intentions?

- encoded meaning plus pragmatic processes?

Well, it depends on what we mean by "determine": in a *metaphysical* or constitutive sense (where the question is roughly *what makes it the case that speaker said what she said?*) it seems plausible that what is said is determined by a speaker's intentions.

We're interested in what determines what is said in an epistemological or cognitive sense: what sort of evidence or psychological processes are involved in *working out* what is said? (Assuming what is said is metaphysically determined by the speaker's intentions, there is an obvious asymmetry. Speakers have some kind of **privileged access** to their intentions: they don't need evidence in the same way as the hearer.)

Near-Side Pragmatics

Following Korta and Perry (2008), we can distinguish between **near-side** and **far-side** pragmatic processes — the processes involved in determining what is said and what is otherwise implicated respectively. Given the underdeterminacy thesis, near-side pragmatic processing comprises more than simply the decoding of encoded meaning.

- Disambiguation (syntactic and lexical)

- Reference assignment/saturation ('I', 'that' etc.)

- Unarticulated constituents ('It's raining', 'Jo hopped and skipped')

- Modulation or adjustment of encoded meaning ('red pen', 'red hair')

- Reference Transfer ('the ham sandwich left without paying')

On the near-side, both the first two categories are fairly uncontroversial, though there is some disagreement about the *extent* of reference assignment. Some theorists argue that there are various phonologically null "hidden variables" or "covert indexicals" at the level of logical form that undergo reference assignment/saturation. (We'll look at this view in more detail in lecture 9.) The last three categories are much more controversial.

- Possible Examples of **Unarticulated Constituents** (UCs)

    - Location: 'It's raining' (in London), 'It's 10pm' (in Paris), '*The Boxtrolls* is showing tonight' (at the Rio)

    - Instrument: 'She took the gun and shot Frances' (with the gun), 'He took the key out of his pocket and opened the door' (with the key)

    - Causal/Temporal: 'Rowan saw Jo and hid behind a tree' (and *as a result*), 'Jo went into the garden and said hello to Rowan' (and *then*)

    A point of controversy: are some (all?) of these actually instances of reference assignment/saturation of hidden variables?

- Possible Examples of **Modulation**

    - Colour adjectives: 'red table', 'red house', 'red bird', 'red leaf', 'red crystal', 'red pen', 'red hair', 'red wine'

    - Polysemous verbs: 'cut', 'open', 'play', 'finished' . . .

    A point of controversy: could processes of modulation also account for some (all?) possible examples of unarticulated constituents?

- Possible Examples of **Transfer**

    - 'The ham sandwich has left without paying'

    A point of controversy: can transfer be regarded as a special case of modulation?

Cases to think about:

'You won't die' (from that cut — can this be anything other than a UC?)

'I've had breakfast' (today — saturation of hidden variable? UC? modulation?)

Controlled vs Free Processes

We can distinguish between:

- linguistically **controlled** pragmatic processes, i.e. processes that are "triggered" by the encoded meanings of the words uttered. Examples include saturation (e.g. assigning the speaker of the context as the referent of the indexical 'I') and perhaps some cases of unarticulated constituents (the location parameter of 'It's raining'?);

and,

- linguistically **free** pragmatic processes, i.e processes that are not "triggered" by encoded meaning. Examples include transfer (the assignment in context of a certain customer as the referent of 'the ham sandwich' is surely not triggered by the meaning of the words), modulation (all cases?), at least some cases of UCs.

For further discussion of pragmatic processing in determining what is said (near-side pragmatic processing), see (Carston 2009) and (Recanati 2004, Ch. 1–2).

Contextualism

Theorists working in the traditional Gricean framework had limited options for explaining variation in a sentence's truth-conditions:

- the variation is due to an **ambiguity**;

- it is **linguistically controlled** by element(s) of the sentence;

- it tracks variation in what is **implicated** rather than said.

The trouble is that, in many cases, none of these options are appealing. Think of 'this leaf is green' again. The variation doesn't seem to be due to any ambiguity, or controlled by any, broadly speaking, indexical element in the sentence, and seems to be in the truth-conditions of what the sentence is used to say rather than what it implicates.

The distinction between controlled and free processes offers another option:

> **The contextualist option**
>
> What is said is the result of linguistically free pragmatic processes.

Next week: we'll consider a debate about definite descriptions as a case study for looking at these options in more detail.

3 Summary

- Linguistic underdeterminacy

- Conventionalism vs. essentialism — eternal sentences

- Metaphysical vs. epistemological/cognitive notions of determination

- Pragmatic processes — near-side and far-side

- Linguistically controlled vs. free pragmatic processes

- Contextualism

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read (Carston 2009) and Chapter 1, §§1.1 – 1.4, (pp. 5-13) of (Recanati 2004).

Questions

1. Can you think of any eternal referring expressions — expressions which refer to the same object in every context?

2. If essentialism about linguistic underdeterminacy is true,

    a) Why might that be the case?

    b) Does it pose a problem for communication? Would communication work better if it were not the case?

3. If I use the sentence 'It's raining' to say that it is raining in London, what I say seems to contain London as an unarticulated constituent. That is to say: in saying what I say, I refer to London even though none of the (phonologically realised) expressions that I utter refers to London. What does it mean to say that this constituent is *linguistically controlled*? Is it? How could we decide the issue?

4. I suggested that the differences in interpretations that we find with the sentence 'this leaf is green', when used to say something about the same leaf on different occasions, seem to be differences in what the sentence is used to say. But we can imagine someone insisting that they are rather differences in what the sentence is used to implicate. How could we decide the issue?

References

Bach, K. (2010) 'Impliciture vs Explicature: What's the Difference?' in B. Soria and E. Romero, eds., *Explicit Communication: Robyn Carston's Pragmatics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) pp. 126–137.

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

——— (2009) 'The Explicit/Implicit Distinction in Pragmatics and the Limits of Explicit Communication' *International Review of Pragmatics* **1** (1) pp. 1–28.

Korta, K. and Perry, J. (2008) 'The Pragmatic Circle' *Synthese* **165** (3) pp. 347–357.

Recanati, F. (1994) 'Contextualism and Anti-Contextualism in the Philosophy of Language' in S. L. Tsohatzidis, ed., *Foundations of Speech Act Theory* (Routledge) pp. 156–166.

——— (2004) *Literal Meaning* (Cambridge University Press).