Issues in Pragmatics

PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 7: Contextualism and Pragmaticism

Overview

We've been looking at the case for **contextualism**, the thesis that there is no level of meaning (interpretation) which is both (i) propositional and (ii) unaffected by top-down processes, like modulation. This week, we will look at the differences between Contextualism as it is developed by Francois Recanati and what I'll call **pragmaticism**, the position of Relevance Theorists like Sperber, Wilson, and Carston. They're often lumped together, but, as we will see, there are important differences between them.

1. Grice's Story

Perhaps the best place to start is not with Recanati or Relevance Theory, but with Grice. Consider an utterance of 'John hit Mary and she cried'. On the Gricean story:

> The word 'and' is equivalent to '&' — so it is, e.g., *symmetric*.
>
> What is said (explicature): John hit Mary & Mary cried.
>
> Implicatures (generalized): Mary cried *after* John hit her.
> Mary cried *because* John hit her.

Temporal sequence and cause-consequence *implicatures* are derived via maxims of conversation: the manner maxim of orderliness, and (probably) the maxim of Relation (Be relevant), respectively. But how exactly is *what is said* supposed to be derived?

> Suppose someone to have uttered the sentence *He is in the grip of a vice*. Given a knowledge of the English language, but no knowledge of the circumstances of the utterance, one would know something about what the speaker had said, on the assumption that he was speaking standard English, and speaking literally. One would know that he has said, about some

> particular male person or animal x, that at the time of the utterance ... either (1) x was unable to rid himself of a certain kind of bad character trait or (2) some part of x's person was caught in a certain kind of tool or instrument ... But for a full identification of what the speaker has said, one would need to know (a) the identity of x, (b) the time of utterance, and (c) the meaning, on the particular occasion of utterance, of the phrase *in the grip of a vice*.
>
> (Grice 1989, p. 25)

Grice distinguishes two levels of content: *what is said* and *implicatures*. Two aspects of this story bear particular emphasis when discussing Recanati and Relevance Theory.

- Content at the level of what is said is derived via encoded meaning, disambiguation, and reference assignment, and so is unaffected by top-down processes.
- There is a sharp distinction to be drawn between the mechanisms underlying derivation of implicatures and those underlying the derivation of what is said.

  More exactly:

  - The derivation of implicatures is a matter of *inference*, based on CP and the various maxims.
  - The derivation of what is said is a matter of some (unspecified) criterion of "contextual best fit".

While Recanati and RTs reject the first aspect of Grice's story — both, for example, would classify temporal sequence and cause-consequence aspects of an utterance of 'John hit Mary and she cried' as aspects of what is said — only RTs reject the second.

2. Recanati's Contextualism

We can think of Recanati's pragmatics as a contextualist version of Grice's. He:

- recognizes much more contextual input to the level of what is said (or explicature) than Grice;
- but agrees with Grice that content at this level is *not* derived via inference based on conversational maxims.

Recanati (2004) distinguishes **two systems**, primary and secondary pragmatic processes.

System 2 processes are fully inferential, maxim-driven processes of implicature derivation. They are straightforwardly Gricean: moving from a set of *premises*, including what is said, contextual assumptions, and the presumption that the speaker is observing the maxims, or at least the Co-operative Principle (CP), to a *conclusion*, the implicature.

An example: A: Are you hungry?
B: I've just had breakfast.

Inferential derivation of the implicature that B is not hungry:

1. B said that she has just had a big breakfast;
2. There is no reason to suppose that she is not observing the CP and the maxims, specifically the maxim of Relation (be relevant);
3. She could not be doing this unless she intended to answer my yes-no question;
4. She believes (and believes that I believe) that when someone has just had a big breakfast that person is not likely to be hungry;
5. She intends me to think that she is not hungry;
6. She is implicating that she is not hungry;

System 1 processes, those involved in deriving what is said, are associative rather than inferential — driven not by maxims or principles, but by accessibility (least effort). Typically, there are several candidates (semantic values) for each aspect of pragmatic interpretation (disambiguation, reference assignment, lexical modulation, etc.). What goes into the interpretation is simply what has the highest level of activation at that point.

Example 1

'The spy checked the hotel room for bugs.'

Ambiguity of 'bugs': (a) INSECTS, (b) HIDDEN MICROPHONES

Both concepts are activated by the word 'bugs', but while the concepts SPY and HIDDEN MICROPHONE are closely connected in an associative network of concepts, the concepts SPY and INSECT are not. Earlier activation of the concept SPY will "spread activation" to the concept HIDDEN MICROPHONE, which is therefore more highly activated (so accessible) than the concept INSECT, and gets composed into the interpretation of the utterance. Accessibility shifts can occur during the course of interpretation, however. For example, if the next part of the utterance is 'He particularly hated cockroaches', accessing the concept COCKROACH would spread activation to the associated concept INSECT, which would then win out over the concept HIDDEN MICROPHONE. The interpretation would be revised, giving a garden-path effect.

Example 2

'Mike went for dinner at a local Italian restaurant. He liked the friendly waiter. He ordered spaghetti carbonara for the first course.'

Reference Assignment to the pronoun 'he': (a) MIKE, (b) THE WAITER

At the point of processing the pronoun 'he', which is the more accessible one? Probably THE WAITER, as it is the candidate most recently mentioned. (Consider replacing the third sentence with: 'He had been working there for many years'.) However, as the rest of the utterance proceeds, MIKE should emerge as the more highly activated candidate and so be incorporated into the interpretation. How?

The role of mental schemas (or scripts):
A mental schema is an abstract representation in memory of a frequently encountered real world situation, with open slots/variables for the context-specific instantiations of some role in the situation. For example, the 'visit to a restaurant' schema would represent the typical sequence of events, including entering the restaurant, taking or being shown to a table, talking to the waiter, consulting the menu, making one's selections, the eating and drinking, receiving the bill, paying and leaving, etc. There will be slots/variables for the participants (customer(s), waiter(s), etc.), the type of food, etc.

How does this help?

> An expression (e.g. 'restaurant') activates an abstract schema in which there is a slot for a value of a certain type (e.g. a customer slot for the person who orders from the menu); the semantic value of an expression represented in the schema (e.g. the concept ORDER) will preferably enter into composition with a semantic value of the relevant type (e.g. MIKE the customer).
>
> (Adapted from Recanati 2004, p. 36.)

Other schemata: attending university; going on holiday; committing a crime and being arrested (see Recanati 2004, chapter 2, for an example of this); catching a bus; ...

Example 3

> 'The city is asleep.'

If we give 'asleep' its literal value, thereby activating the SLEEP schema, then the value of 'city' will have to be of the relevant type (e.g. human or animal), hence non-literal. Closely associated with the lexically encoded concept CITY are the concepts BUILDINGS, INHABITANTS, GOVERNMENT ... The one that most likely fits the particular slot in the SLEEP schema, i.e. is able to have the property of being 'asleep', is (probably) INHABITANTS.

> In the framework I have sketched, the interpretation ['what is said'] which eventually emerges and incorporates the output of various pragmatic processes results from a blind, mechanical process, involving no reflection on the interpreter's part. The dynamics of accessibility does everything and no "inference" is required. In particular, there is no need to consider the speaker's beliefs and intentions.
>
> (Recanati 2004, p. 32)

Note: The kind of context at work here is 'wide' (as opposed to 'narrow' semantic context), but the interaction of that context with the decoded linguistic forms is entirely automatic, without any recourse by the hearer/interpreter to considerations concerning speaker mental states or the use of any pragmatic criteria (Gricean maxims or 'optimal relevance') for selecting the correct interpretation.

3. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory is usually classified as a form of **radical contextualism** alongside Recanati's Contextualism. But while they agree on many issues, there are also imporant differences.

Points of Agreement

- Sentence meaning is non-propositional (it's schematic, providing a template for the construction of propositional content).
- There is a lot more pragmatic input to the level of explicit utterance content (what is said, explicature) than disambiguation and reference assignment (contra Grice).

Points of Disagreement

- The derivation of explicatures is as much a matter of pragmatic inference as the derivation of implicatures; consideration of a speaker's mental states (beliefs, intentions) may be involved in both.
- One and the same pragmatic criterion applies to both implicatures and explicatures: the overall interpretation is presumed to be optimally relevant; based on this presumption, a hearer accepts the first interpretation that meets his current expectations of (optimal) relevance.

Communicative Principle of Relevance
Every utterance (and ostensive stimulus more generally) coveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

The notion of *optimal relevance* here is meant to capture what the audience of an act of ostensive communication is entitled to expect in terms of effort and effect:

Optimal Relevance
An utterance (ostensive stimulus) is optimally relevant to an audience IFF it is:

(a) relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort; and

(b) the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

Relevance-Theoretic Compehension Procedure

1. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference assignments, etc.) in order of accessibility.
2. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

See Appendix A. for an example, taken from Wilson and Sperber 2004.

Sometimes the inferential process involved in deriving an explicature may involve premises about the speaker's mental states (e.g. her beliefs, her preferences).

Example: Student (Sarah) to me (one of her lecturers): 'John has broken his leg'

Candidate referents:	My son, John ($JOHN_1$), My phonology colleague John ($JOHN_2$), who teaches Sarah
Explicature:	$JOHN_2$ HAS BROKEN HIS_2 LEG
Most accessible referent for me:	$JOHN_1$

How do I come to reject the first referent I accessed in favour of the second? Plausibly, via a premise about Sarah's knowledge state: 'Sarah does not know that I have a son'.

For further discussion, see Carston (2007) and Mazzarella (2011).

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read chapter 2 of Recanati (2004) and, time permitting, pages 18–32 of Carston (2007).

Questions

1. Consider how Recanati's approach in terms of associative (primary) pragmatic processes (and schemata) would account for the derivation of the explicature in a case of lexical meaning modulation ('green' in (a) below) and a case of an unarticulated constituent (as communicated by Lisa's utterance in (b) below):

   a) 'The leaves are green' uttered in the context of designing and painting foliage for the set of a theatrical production.

   b) Max: Would you like to join us for supper?

      Lisa: No thanks, I've eaten.

2. According to Recanati's account of primary pragmatic processes, the (correct) interpretation is arrived at by 'a blind, mechanical process ... The dynamics of accessibility does everything and no "inference" is required. In particular, there is no need to consider the speaker's beliefs and intentions.'

   a) What is the key difference between the kind of associative processes he advocates here and an inferential process?

   b) What role does the context (specifically, mental schemas that represent frequently experienced situations, e.g. the 'restaurant' schema) play in his primary pragmatic processes?

   c) According to the RT comprehension procedure, we are licensed to follow a path of least effort in forming interpretive hypotheses, so how does the RT account differ from Recanatis account which turns on accessibility (least effort)?

   d) In the lecture and in chapter 2 of Recanati (2004), we see examples where this account in terms of 'accessibility' (to the hearer), without any need for the hearer to consider the speaker's epistemic states (beliefs, intentions), seems to work well.

      However, consider the following case of reference assignment: I am in conversation with my elderly colleague, Prof. Plum, about the progress of our logic students, whose exam papers he has just marked. I know that the best student in the group is a young woman called Sharon, but I'm not sure how the others are doing. I also know that Prof Plum thinks one of the other students, Sharleen, is called Sharon. Suppose he says to me: 'I'm afraid that Sharon has failed the exam'. Who will I take him to be referring to? Who does Recanatis system of primary pragmatic processes predict I will assign as the referent of 'Sharon'?

      Can you think of other cases where the hearer has to take account of the speakers knowledge or intentions when assigning reference (or doing any of the other tasks involved in deriving the explicature)?

References

Carston, R. (2007) 'How Many Pragmatic Systems are There?' in M. Frapolli, ed., *Saying, Meaning and Referring* (Palgrave Macmillan) pp. 18–48.

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

Mazzarella, D. (2011) 'Accessibility and Relevance: A fork in the road' *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* .

Recanati, F. (2004) *Literal Meaning* (Cambridge University Press).

Wilson, D. and Sperber, D. (2004) 'Relevance Theory' in L. R. Horn and G. Ward, eds., *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (Oxford: Blackwell) pp. 607–632.

A. The RT Comprehension Procedure – An Example

Peter: Did John pay back the money he owed you?
Mary: No. He forgot to go to the bank.

(a) Mary has said to Peter, "He_x forgot to go to the $BANK_1/BANK_2$." [He_x = uninterpreted pronoun] [$BANK_1$ = financial institution] [$BANK_2$ = river bank]	*Embedding of the decoded (incomplete) logical form of Mary's utterance into a description of Mary's ostensive behavior.*
(b) Mary's utterance will be optimally relevant to Peter.	*Expectation raised by recognition of Mary's ostensive behavior and acceptance of the presumption of relevance it conveys.*
(c) Mary's utterance will achieve relevance by explaining why John has not repaid the money he owed her.	*Expectation raised by (b), together with the fact that such an explanation would be most relevant to Peter at this point.*
(d) Forgetting to go to the $BANK_1$ may make one unable to repay the money one owes.	*First assumption to occur to Peter which, together with other appropriate premises, might satisfy expectation (c). Accepted as an implicit premise of Mary's utterance.*
(e) John forgot to go to the $BANK_1$.	*First enrichment of the logical form of Mary's utterance to occur to Peter which might combine with (d) to lead to the satisfaction of (c). Accepted as an explicature of Mary's utterance.*
(f) John was unable to repay Mary the money he owes because he forgot to go to the $BANK_1$.	*Inferred from (d) and (e), satisfying (c) and accepted as an implicit conclusion of Mary's utterance.*
(g) John may repay Mary the money he owes when he next goes to the $BANK_1$.	*From (f) plus background knowledge. One of several possible weak implicatures of Mary's utterance which, together with (f), satisfy expectation (b).*