Issues in Pragmatics

PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 6: Speaker Intentions and Context

Summarising the story so far

A brief summary of the last few weeks:

a. We saw that there is a good case for the linguistic underdeterminacy of both what is said (proposition expressed/explicature) and implicatures.

> A: How was the party? Did it go well?
>
> B: There wasn't enough drink and everyone left early.
>
> — THERE WASN'T ENOUGH **ALCOHOLIC** DRINK **TO SATISFY THE PEOPLE AT THE PARTY**$_1$ AND **SO** EVERYONE **WHO CAME TO IT**$_1$ LEFT **IT**$_1$ EARLY.
>
> Implicature: THE PARTY DID NOT GO WELL.

We saw that various pragmatic processes may be involved in **determining** what is said: disambiguation, reference assignment and other saturation processes, 'free' enrichment by unarticulated constituents and/or modulation of word meaning. Some are **bottom up** (**linguistically controlled**): reference assignment, and maybe other saturation processes like completions of 'Bill is ready'; others are **top down** (**linguistically free**):

- I went to the Rio last night. *The Boxtrolls* was on.
  — *The Boxtrolls* WAS ON AT THE RIO AT TIME t

- Modulated word meanings, e.g. 'This leaf is green'.

b. Grice's own story is that what is said departs only **minimally** from the encoded meaning of the sentence uttered, and is unaffected by top-down processes, being determined by disambiguation and reference assignment (and possibly other saturation processes). On his view, top down processing only determines speakers' implicatures.

c. On the **contextualist**'s view, most, perhaps all, sentences do not express a proposition (truth-evaluable content) without top-down effects of context/pragmatics. The encoded meaning of a sentence is a non-propositional *template* for propositions.

In the next five weeks, we'll be looking at problems with and alternatives to contextualism. First, it will be useful to think a little more critically about the notion of **context**.

1 What is a context?

a. In formal semantics, a context is a set of parameters — individuals and objects such as the speaker, addressee(s), time, location, demonstrated object(s), etc.

David Kaplan (see, e.g., his 1979) uses this notion to draw a distinction between **character** and **content**. The character of an expression is a function from contexts to contents — something like a rule for determining the content of the expression, relative to a given context. The character of the indexical 'I', for example, is a function from contexts to individuals (the *speakers* in those contexts) while the character of 'today' is a function from contexts to days (the days of those contexts). While the content of an expression typically varies from context to context, its character does not. We might think of the character of an expression as a rough approximation of its encoded meaning.

b. We can draw a distinction between:

   i. Narrow (semantic) context: as above (formal, objective, externalist)

   ii. Wide (pragmatic) context: can be any subset of a hearer's current perceptions and entire background knowledge (incl. general knowledge about the world, stereotypic beliefs, personal experiences, etc.)

Thus Kent Bach:

> There are two sorts of contextual information, one much more restricted in scope than the other. Information that plays the limited role of combining with linguistic information to determine content (in the sense of fixing it) is restricted to a short list of variables, such as the identity of the speaker and the hearer and the time and place of an utterance. Contextual information in the broad sense is anything that the hearer is to take into account to determine (in the sense of ascertain) the speaker's communicative intention.
>
> (Bach 1999, p. 72)

c. Cognitively-oriented pragmatics (e.g. Relevance Theory), which aims to be psychologically realistic, assumes context is wide and consists of the set of mentally represented assumptions the hearer uses in reaching an interpretation of the utterance.

2 Notions of determination

What 'determines' the interpretation of an utterance? One common answer is: (a) the linguistic structure of sentence/expression uttered (i.e. its syntax and the encoded meanings of its constituents) plus (b) the context of utterance.

But this answer is ambiguous. We saw in previous weeks that there are two distinct notions of 'determine'. Correspondingly, there are two distinct questions to be asked. The question, "What determines the interpretation of an utterance?", can be taken either **metaphysically** as the question, "What *makes it the case* that X is the interpretation?", or **epistemologically** as the question, "How does one *work out* the interpretation?".

Consequently, we can distinguish two distinct ways in which the context of utterance might be said to help 'determine' the interpretation of an utterance:

- **Metaphysical**: linguistic meaning together with components of context *constitute* utterance meaning.

- **Epistemological**: linguistic meaning and components of context provide *evidence* that enables the hearer/addressee to understand/grasp utterance meaning.

The epistemological (or evidential) claim is straightforward and is what we intend when we talk of linguistic meaning underdetermining utterance content/interpretation/speaker meaning. The metaphysical claim is much more controversial.

3 The metaphysical notion of determination

Consider the following example involving disambiguation (Fodor and Lepore 2004):

> Groucho: I shot an elephant in my pajamas. [pause]
> How he got into my pajamas I'll never know. [laughter]
>
> Structural ambiguity:
> a. [I (in my pajamas)] shot an elephant.
> b. I shot [an elephant (in my pajamas)]

The joke relies on background assumptions/beliefs about elephants, pajamas, etc:

> So, background considerations [i.e. context] can determine the truth conditions of an (otherwise) ambiguous utterance, and the issue is whether they do so by providing metaphysically necessary conditions for the utterance to have the interpretation that it does. We think not. We think that what makes one or the other disambiguation the right one is only ... what Groucho has in mind. Accordingly, the rest of the background has only epistemic

[or evidential] relevance to the interpretation of his utterance: it provides information that (e.g.) Harpo can use to figure out how Groucho intended the utterance to be understood.

<div align="right">(Fodor and Lepore 2004, p. 9)</div>

The rest of the argument:

a. If the context/background assumptions were constitutive of the correct disambiguation, it would follow that there are contexts in which, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, Groucho couldn't make his joke — it would be impossible to get the interpretation that the pajamas were on the elephant. There are no such contexts.

b. Harpo only knows how to parse Groucho's utterance if he has access to the relevant contextual facts. But if it were the case that utterances only have complete meanings/interpretations when coupled with a context, then Groucho (the speaker) would be in the same situation as Harpo. Without access to the relevant contextual information, Groucho himself wouldn't know what the explicature of his utterance was.

Asymmetry between speakers and addressees:

c. Like any speaker, Groucho has privileged access to his own communicative intentions, hence to the explicature (truth-conditional content) of his own utterance. His access (unlike that of his addressees) to the meaning/content of his utterance is not achieved via inference from what he knows about the immediate (perceptual) context or his general background knowledge. Speakers don't have to decode and pragmatically infer the meaning of their own utterances.

More generally: there is no pragmatics of thought.

Conclusion: Content is not determined (= constituted) by linguistic structure and context but rather by the speaker's communicative intentions (M-intentions).

The function of background knowledge (context) in interpretation is (only) to provide premises for the hearer's inferences about the speakers intentions, If the resolution of ambiguity is typical of interpretation at large, then what has content is not speech-in-a-context but speech as its speaker intends it.

<div align="right">(Fodor and Lepore 2004, p. 10)</div>

4 Humpty Dumpty

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all."

(Lewis Carroll (1872) *Through the Looking-Glass*)

Humpty Dumpty raises questions about the limits on what we can mean when we use a word, e.g. 'glory', 'green', 'cold'. [What about when we use *pure indexicals*, words like 'I', 'today'?] What/who is the 'master'? — the language or the speaker or the hearer? What, if any, constraints are there on the communicative intentions we can form?

Response: intentions quite generally are constrained by expectations. More specifically, a speaker's communicative intention is constrained by her reasonable expectations about what the hearer can figure out (Elugardo and Stainton 2004, p. 446).

The fact about intentions that I want to stress is that they are essentially connected with expectations. Ask someone to flap his arms with the intentions of flying. In response he can certainly wave his arms up and down, just as one can easily, when told to do so, say the words 'It's cold in here'. But this is not to do it with the intention of flying. Nor does it seem to me that a normal adult in normal circumstances can flap his arms and in doing so really have that intention ... Similarly, one cannot say entirely out of the blue, 'It's cold here' and mean 'It's hot here', but not, I think, because whatever one's intentions the word will not get invested with that meaning. Rather, we explain this by the impossibility of having the right intentions in such circumstances.

(Donnellan 1968, p. 212)

On this view, available context does constrain the kind of communicative intention a reasonable speaker can have.

Where, then, does the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered fit into this picture? What an addressee can be reasonably expected to figure out is (surely) constrained by the encoded (standing) linguistic meaning of the words used.

So a (rationally-functioning) speaker is constrained in the communicative intention she can form by context and linguistic meaning (in so far as she grasps them both), though neither of these can be said to *constitute* her intended meaning.

5 Demonstratives and indexicals

Does context only play an evidential role in reference assignment?

a. Demonstratives (e.g. 'this', 'that', 'she', 'they').

Consider the following scenario and analysis (adapted from Kaplan 1978):

> Suppose that, without turning round and looking, my student Emma points to the place on my study wall which has been long occupied by a picture of my hero, Noam Chomsky, and she says: 'That is a picture of the greatest intellectual of the twentieth century'. But unknown to Emma, someone has replaced my picture of Chomsky with one of George W. Bush. It would simply be wrong to maintain that there is an 'ambiguity' in the demonstration such that it can be taken to indicate Emma's intended demonstratum (referent). Rather, Emma has said of the portrait of George W. Bush that it is a picture of the greatest intellectual of the twentieth century. Her utterance and demonstration (pointing) suggest no other natural interpretation to the linguistically competent public observer (the hearer).

Is this a counter-example to the claim that interpretation is constituted by the speaker's communicative intention? Here, doesn't a component of the context (the speaker's act of pointing to a portrait of G. W. Bush) make it the case that the speaker is saying something about a picture of *Bush*? Clearly, the interpretation that is most accessible to the linguistically competent hearer is: THE PICTURE OF GEORGE W. BUSH IS A PICTURE OF THE GREATEST INTELLECTUAL OF THE 20TH CENTURY.

No. All this shows is that the "correct interpretation" — the one the speaker had in mind — is not available to the hearer. The speaker has failed to ensure that the hearer has access to the necessary evidence/clues (linguistic and contextual) so as to be able to grasp the intended interpretation. There is miscommunication here, but it doesn't follow that the contextual fact that the picture is of George W. Bush makes it the case that the speaker's meaning concerns *that* picture rather than the one she had in mind.

> That this mistaken interpretation (by any hearer or onlooker) would be fully justified doesn't show that it would be true (correct). The speaker (Emma) got it wrong about the picture she thought she was pointing at, but does that mean she also got it wrong about who she was referring to? Or (equally bizarre to us) could Emma have been referring to one guy while her utterance was referring to another?
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> <div align="right">(Fodor and Lepore 2004, pp. 13-14)</div>

Conclusion: What constitutes the reference of a demonstrative is determined by the speaker's communicative intention (i.e. by what she intends to communicate).

b. (Pure) Indexicals (e.g. I', you', today', maybe here' and now').

Suppose Tom, who (falsely) believes himself to be Michael Jackson, says 'I am a star', intending thereby to say of Michael Jackson that he is a star. Still, it is himself that he has referred to, not MJ, and his utterance is true if and only if he (Tom) is a star.
Fodor & Lepore agree with this (p.14), so this looks like a case where facts about the context (the narrow semantic context) do override the speaker's communicative intentions and the correct interpretation is different from the one that the speaker had in mind.

The disquotational report test:

In reporting accurately someone's utterance which contains a singular term (demonstrative, indexical, name), the reporter must pick out the same individual as the original speaker:

>
> Tom: <u>This</u> is a tree-slug.
> Rachel: Tom said that <u>this</u> is a tree-slug.
>
> Tom: <u>I</u> am a star.
> Rachel: Tom said that <u>I</u> am a star.
> Rachel: Tom said that <u>he</u> is a star.

Indexicals are special: they don't survive disquotation when they are reported. Unlike 'this', (pure) indexicals like 'I' are dedicated terms. While 'this' (and other demonstratives) picks out whatever the speaker demonstrates, 'I' always picks out the speaker.

6 Conclusion

a. In the first instance, it's thoughts or propositional attitudes (e.g. believing that P, intending that Q) which have a content (meaning/interpretation). Hence it's the communicative intention of a speaker that has a content (prior to the utterance).

b. Interpreting, on the other hand, is the process whereby hearers recover (or attempt to recover) the content of communicative intentions from the noises that speakers make when they try to express them.

c. Utterances get an interpretation (through the efforts of hearers), but states of mind (thoughts, intentions) simply have an interpretation (as part of what they are).

Some metaphysical story about the content of communicative intentions must thus be prior to any story about the epistemology of linguistic communication.

<div align="right">(Fodor and Lepore 2004, p. 16)</div>

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read Fodor and Lepore (2004). Some of this paper is quite tough, but the central point about the role of context versus speaker intentions should emerge from the examples discussed. If you are uncertain about any terminology, please ask in back-up classes!

Questions

1. Some philosophers of language maintain that we can treat demonstratives (e.g. 'this', 'that', 'she', 'they', etc.) in the same way as pure indexicals (e.g. 'I', 'today'), by (i) maintaining that the encoded meaning of a demonstrative is a rule that it refers to what the speaker intends it to refer to and (ii) adding to the narrow (semantic) context a sequence of 'speaker's intended referents', so that the nth demonstrative in the sentence will refer to the nth member of the sequence.

   Recanati (2004, pp. 67–68) claims this is cheating: "we pretend that we can manage with a limited, narrow notion of context of the sort we need for handling (pure) indexicals, while in fact we can only determine the speaker's intended referent by resorting to pragmatic interpretation and relying on wide context."

   a) What do you think? Is it cheating or not?

   b) How about a similar (non-pragmatic) treatment of 'now' and 'here', so that their reference is a function of narrow context? How would it go and would it also be "cheating" in Recanati's terms?

   c) How satisfactory is the formal (narrow) context account of the 'pure' indexicals themselves, that is, 'today', 'you' and 'I'? (To assess this you need to think about a range of uses of these words.)

2. Consider the following quote from Barwise and Perry (1983, p. 148): 'Even if I am fully convinced that I am Napoleon, my use of "I" designates me, not him. Similarly, I may be fully convinced that it is 1789, but it does not make my use of "now" about a time in 1789.'

   Is this an exception to the view that it is the content of the speaker's communicative intention that constitutes (determines) the content of the utterance (its explicature/what is said)?

3. The following examples involve what is called 'shifted reference':

(i) Zak is playing Monopoly, and the wedge-shaped token is his game piece. Zak, who is clearly sitting on the couch, says "I'm on a purple square".

(ii) Mary records and installs a message on her telephone answering machine: "I'm not at home today. Please leave a message". Five days later Bill rings and hears the message.

Focussing on 'I' in the first case and 'today' in the second case:

a) What do they refer to?

b) What issue does this raise for the standard (narrow context) account of (pure) indexicals?

c) What role is played here by the speaker's communicative intention?

d) Is there a Humpty Dumpty problem here? If not, what constraints are there on reference shifting?

4. Malapropisms and slips of the tongue:

Malapropisms are a kind of verbal mistake, also known as slips-of-the-tongue, named after Mrs Malaprop, a character in the play The Rivals (1775) by Richard Sheridan.

Some examples:

(i) 'I have since laid Sir Anthony's preposition before her' [proposition]

(ii) 'I am sorry to say, Sir Anthony, that my affluence over my niece is very small' [influence]

(iii) 'Nay, no delusions to the past - Lydia is convinced' [allusions]

(iv) 'He must be disciplined he constantly flaunts the rules' [flouts]

a) What determines the speaker's meaning in these cases?

b) What plays the key role in the comprehension (figuring out) of the speaker meaning in these examples: the encoded lexical meaning, some other linguistic factor(s), aspects of context, pragmatic inferences aimed at recovering the speaker's communicative intention, or something else?

Compare malapropisms with the following cases, where the speaker believes that 'livid' means 'red in the face' (according to dictionaries, it means 'unnaturally white or pale') and that 'arthritis' denotes a muscular disease (instead of a disease of the joints):

(i) John was really angry with Mary in fact, he was livid was rage.

(ii) Mrs Jones had arthritis in her thigh.

5. The main argument of the lecture was that what constitutes the meaning of an utterance is the thought(s) that fall within the speaker's communicative intention rather than features of context that a hearer may use in figuring out the speaker's meaning.

Consider whether or not this carries over to highly poetic uses of language, such as the two examples below, where it seems that there can be a range of distinct (albeit related) interpretations that are equally good (none of them need be treated as cases of misinterpretation).

W. B Yeats 'The Balloon of the Mind':

Hands, do what you're bid:

Bring the balloon of the mind

That bellies and drags in the wind

Into its narrow shed.

Haiku poem by Basho (1680):

On a leafless bough

A crow is perched

The autumn dusk.

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