Thoughts and Utterances

The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication

ROBYN CARSTON
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For Vlad
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Introduction

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with the weight.
(Emily Dickinson, 1894)

Some formidably able minds have maintained that a pragmatic theory is not possible, that communication and interpretation are not topics which submit to scientific study. Donald Davidson (1986) observes that 'the interpreter' includes everything that people might know and are capable of doing, so nothing sensible can be said about it. Noam Chomsky (1992a) endorses this view, seeing the wish for a theory of the interpreter as tantamount to a 'demand for a theory of everything', the pursuit of which will lead to a theory of nothing. By a theory of 'the interpreter', both Chomsky and Davidson mean something very much like a pragmatic theory: 'The interpreter, presented with an utterance and a situation, assigns some interpretation to what is being said by a person in this situation.' But this, the topic of successful communication, 'is far too complex and obscure to merit attention in empirical inquiry' (Chomsky 1992a: 120); it would seem to be a mystery, in Chomsky's terms, rather than a tractable intellectual problem.

Jerry Fodor (1983, 1986, 1987b) holds a similar position. Understanding an utterance involves arriving at a confirmed hypothesis about what the speaker meant; that is, it is one kind of belief fixation and fixing beliefs is the function of the holistic inference processes of the central systems of the mind. While the peripheral input and output systems, which mediate perception (including language perception) and execute motor routines, are fast, automatic processors, oblivious to much potentially relevant information, the central systems are intelligent and reflective, they look around and consider the options. Precisely because these central thought processes are domain-general, with no architectural constraints on the information
that may be consulted in arriving at their decisions, they are very unlikely, in Fodor’s view, to yield to scientific investigation. He formulates this as his First Law of the Non-existence of Cognitive Science: ‘the more global a cognitive process is, the less anybody understands it’. His pet case is scientific hypothesis formation and confirmation, but, clearly, utterance interpretation is also a global process, albeit a much quicker, more spontaneous one, than scientific theorizing; in principle, information from virtually anywhere about virtually anything might have a bearing on the interpretation of an utterance. ¹ So, in Fodor’s (and Chomsky’s) view, among the full range of processes involved in verbal understanding, we may come to have some systematic understanding of just those that deliver the logical forms of linguistic expressions, since they are fully determined by a system of autonomous domain-specific principles responsive to the acoustic properties of speech, that is, they are context-independent. There is going to be no science of human communication; we have to turn to the arts, to novelists and playwrights, in order to get some (inevitably unsystematic and anecdotal) insights into communication and interpretation.

The relevance-theoretic framework developed in the 1980s by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson can be seen as a response to the challenge presented by these sceptics. Their work lies squarely within the wider Fodorian view of mind: it assumes that the mind is, at least in part, a system of (subsystems of) representations which have syntactic and semantic properties, and that mental processes are computations driven by the formal (syntactic) properties of these representations, it recognizes a conceptual language of thought which is distinct from any particular natural language, and it adopts the view that the mind is to some extent modular in structure. Assuming this Fodorian basis, Sperber and Wilson (1986a/1995b) set out to give an account of how hearers (interpreters) reach the intended interpretation of an utterance quickly and with relative certainty, despite the fact that there are, in principle, indefinitely many possible interpretations, all compatible with the linguistically encoded content. The question that has to be addressed is how it is that hearers do not get into ever lengthier chains of inference, searching for more and more possible interpretations and comparing them, in a bid to find the ‘right’ one or the ‘best’ one.

Sperber and Wilson point out that fixing a belief about a speaker’s informative intention differs from scientific theorizing and also from quite mundane human decision-making processes in two ways. First, it typically involves a much shorter time-scale than scientific theorizing and is also generally quicker than much non-scientific decision-making (what to buy mother for Christmas, whether to accept a job offer, where to go for a relaxing summer holiday, etc.). Utterance interpretation is very rapid and, however much evidence might, in principle, be taken into account, only a very small range is usually considered, in practice. Second, while the data for scientific theorizing comes from impassive nature, which is not actively involved in helping scientists build correct theories, the data for utterance interpretation comes from a helpful source: speakers generally want their informative intentions to be fulfilled and so shape their communicative stimuli accordingly.

These two factors – the time pressure inherent in on-line processing and the speaker’s responsibility for the quality of the stimulus she produces – are reflected in the concept of ‘optimal relevance’ which is the key notion in the theory. (It is
discussed here in a fairly intuitive sort of way; see ‘presumption of optimal relevance’ in appendix 1 for a little more precision, and chapter 2 for exemplification.)
By virtue of the overt demand for attention, hence for expenditure of processing resources, that an utterance (or any other ostensive communicative behaviour) makes on an addressee, he is entitled to expect it to yield an interpretation which has a worthwhile range of cognitive effects for him and to require no gratuitous expenditure of effort on his part in deriving these effects; an interpretation which meets this expectation is ‘optimally relevant’. Given this way of viewing the mental interaction of speaker and hearer, ‘the very fact that an element of interpretation comes first to [the hearer’s] mind is an argument in its favour’ (Sperber 2000: 132).
This is, clearly, a major factor in overcoming the alleged ‘all things considered’, inferentially unconstrained nature of the interpretive processes. The claim, then, is that hearers construct and test interpretive hypotheses in order of their accessibility, and once they have found an interpretation which satisfies their expectation of relevance they stop.
This construal of pragmatics, as a cognitive account of the processes involved in understanding utterances, is clearly a quite different matter from the ‘pragmatic turn’ taken within the philosophy of language in the 1950s, which has, nevertheless, exerted an important influence on all subsequent pragmatic theorizing whether philosophical, linguistic or of this cognitive psychological sort. The so-called ‘ordinary language’ philosophers (J. L. Austin, Peter Strawson, the later Wittgenstein and, in many ways, H. P. Grice) concentrated their conceptual analytical efforts on describing natural language meaning as used by ordinary people, both in their one-to-one interactions and in the context of social institutions. They were reacting to the focus on ‘ideal’ logical languages, which dominated the first half of the twentieth century (associated with, among others, Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell), where the primary aim was to make quite explicit which inferences were logically valid and which were not, and so to pin down the logical commitments of expressing a particular proposition or making a particular statement. Naturally enough, extrapolation from the properties of fully explicit, content-invariant logical languages to the properties of natural language had led to a gross underestimation of the context-sensitivity of natural language utterances, a lack of interest in the nuances of non-logical word meaning and a sidelong of all sentence types other than declaratives. The ordinary language philosophers, and the ensuing speech act tradition, redressed that imbalance and, under the influence of Grice, in particular, the two approaches were largely reconciled as complementary endeavours – the one, semantics, concerned with ‘what the words say’; the other, pragmatics, with ‘what the speaker means’ – rather than as rival approaches to linguistic meaning. (See Recanati (1994, 1998) for a more detailed account of the development of pragmatics within the philosophy of language.)
A primary motivation for Grice’s interest in the conditions or norms governing conversation, or discourse more generally, was that he saw them as providing a means for preserving some of the important parallels between logical languages and natural language semantics, which had been established by Russell, Frege and other logicians, and which were under threat from the meaning analyses of some of the ordinary language philosophers (see Grice 1975: 41–3). These included the position