

UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION

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Consider the (attested) example in (1) below. Tim is in a music shop and has just tried out a beautiful vintage guitar, which is staggeringly expensive. Smiling broadly, and handing the lovely guitar back to his friend David, who owns the shop, Tim begins the following exchange:

- (1) Tim: Well, I didn't like that at all.
 David: I didn't think you would. Awful, isn't it?

Given the **context** provided above, it's clear that both Tim and David mean the exact *opposite* of what they are saying, and are communicating to each other that they regard the guitar as a thing of rare beauty. The central question a theory of utterance interpretation needs to answer is how it is that hearers bridge the gap between what people say and what people mean by what they say.

While it's true that cases in which speakers say one thing and mean something entirely different are the clearest cases of the kind of gap that needs to be bridged, there are more complex factors at play. There's more to the gap between sentence **meaning** (the domain of **semantics**) and utterance meaning (the domain of **pragmatics**) than is evident in (1). As a result, there are a number of further challenges to which theories of utterance interpretation must rise. Consider the sign in (2), written on the door of a charity shop near where I live:

- (2) Sorry! Guide dogs only.

Taken literally, the sign prohibits all creatures except guide dogs from entering the shop (including humans, presumably). However, it is unlikely that anyone – other than someone writing an entry in a pragmatics encyclopaedia – would read it this way. Instead, we recognize it is intended to convey something like ‘If you own a dog, you can only bring that dog into this shop with you if it is a guide dog’. It communicates much more than the words themselves say. There’s nothing implied, but in order for someone reading the sign to understand what the sign actually communicates, they need to do much more than simply understand the words.

Linguists call this kind of phenomenon linguistic underdeterminacy (sometimes semantic underdeterminacy), and distinguish it from the implied meaning in (1). The idea is that, irrespective of any **irony** or sarcasm that a speaker may intend, what is linguistically encoded in an utterance *still* more often than not falls well short of what it is intended to communicate in crucial ways. A couple of obvious examples are those in (3) and (4). Before the speaker of these utterances can be understood, **indexicals** must have **reference** assigned to them and an ambiguous word must be disambiguated:

(3) He lost it over there.

(4) The students are revolting!

Some less obvious examples are included below:

(5) I’ve literally got nothing to wear!

(6) Jack drinks too much.

(7) Have you seen Laura's painting?

If (5) is uttered in exasperation whilst preparing to go to a party, it is unlikely the speaker is intending to convey that they spend their entire life in the nude. What the speaker means by 'nothing' is something more akin to 'nothing suitable for the party'. The **proposition** expressed by an utterance of (6) will (probably) include the fact that it is alcohol that Jack drinks too much of, and also information concerning what it is that Jack drinks too much to do: to operate machinery, for example, or to be entrusted with driving everyone home from a party. In (7), the precise nature of the relationship between Laura and the painting – whether it is one that she owns, one that she has painted, or one that she loves above any other – is information that is not included in the words themselves.

Various proposals have been made as to how the gap might be bridged and most modern accounts can be traced back to the work of H. Paul **Grice** (1957, 1989). Grice proposed that utterance interpretation is not just a matter of coding and decoding. Rather, it is a rational, inferential activity involving the expression and recognition of **intentions**. It is a two-stage process: in the first stage, a hearer decodes the words they have heard; in the second, the hearer uses the linguistic meaning to work out (or infer) the intended speaker meaning. Since **conversation** is a rational activity, hearers are guided in the interpretive process by the expectation that a speaker will be meeting certain standards. From this it follows that they will behave in certain predictable ways. A hearer can therefore recognize the best hypothesis about

the speaker's meaning by arriving at an interpretation that satisfies those expectations the speaker is aiming at, or standards he or she is trying to meet.

Grice's own account of utterance interpretation appealed to a **cooperative principle** and conversational **maxims** (Grice 1967). In the exchange in (1) Tim and David are both overtly violating what Grice called the first *Maxim of Quality* ('Do not say what you believe to be false'). However, they are still being cooperative, and in interpreting the utterances they will both search for another proposition related to the one the speaker is expressing. For Grice, the most obvious candidate would be the opposite propositions to the ones actually expressed. David would therefore infer that Tim likes the guitar a great deal, and Tim will infer that David knew this would be the case, and that he likes it also.

But as far as the process of utterance interpretation is concerned, Grice's maxims only come into play once the hearer has successfully derived the proposition the speaker has expressed (or in Grice's terms, **what is said** by the speaker). More researchers, who have built on Grice's work have noticed that the extra layers of meaning present in (5) to (7) are actually *part* of Grice's 'what is said'. As a result, different proposals have been made as to exactly how his framework, which only dealt with implied meaning (or **implicatures**), might be adapted to assimilate this. These proposals impact in various ways on how we might conceive of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, between these notions and Grice's notion of what is said, and also the relationship between decoding and inference.

Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), for example, does away with the notion of ‘what is said’ entirely, and pragmatically-derived elements of the proposition expressed by the speaker are called *explicatures*; Bach (1994) retains a minimal, semantic notion of what is said and calls pragmatically-derived elements of the proposition expressed the level of *impliciture* (note the second ‘i’); Recanati (2004) calls the kind of phenomena in (5)-(7) instances of *saturation*, and regards saturation as one of a group of processes that takes place in the derivation of pragmatic aspects of an enriched version of what is said. The debate continues (see Atlas 2005; Carston 2002; Horn 2005; Recanati 2004). However, most people now agree that linguistic **communication** is indeed an inferential activity, and that hearers are guided in the interpretive process by an expectation that a speaker will meet certain standards (Levinson 2000; Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

While Grice was a philosopher, a consequence of his pioneering work has been the recognition that a full-fledged theory of utterance interpretation will need to encompass ideas from disciplines beyond **philosophy**. Utterance interpretation, for example, involves inferential computations, which need to be explained. It also exploits the human ability to interpret the actions of others in terms of the mental states behind these actions, known as **theory of mind**. After Grice, the study of pragmatics has had to become truly cross-disciplinary with links to **cognitive science**, psychology and beyond.

Turning first to the question of what inferential computations might be involved in utterance interpretation, introductory logic books generally introduce the notion of **inference** by means of examples such as those below:

(8) Premise 1: If it's snowing, it's cold.

Premise 2: It's snowing.

Conclusion: It's cold.

This is a straightforward example of the process logicians call deduction. It is a foolproof argument, insofar as in any case where the two premises are true, the conclusion will also be true. But is it correct that the inferences made during the process of utterance interpretation are always true? This is probably not the case. The fact that **misunderstandings** occur is clear evidence that **inferential comprehension** is not foolproof and, hence, that the kind of inferential processes at work are not *all* deductive. Even in cases where a hearer interprets an utterance correctly, the inference is at best only an inference-to-the-best-explanation. Since misunderstandings do happen, hearers can *never* be sure that the interpretation they arrive at is the one intended by the speaker.

Some researchers (e.g. Levinson 1983) have suggested that interpretative inferences are inductive or probabilistic, such as the one in (9) (see also Brown and Yule 1983):

(9) Premise 1: When it rains he usually carries an umbrella.

Premise 2: It's raining.

Conclusion: He's carrying an umbrella.

In contrast with the inference in (8), notice that even if the two premises in the example are true, the conclusion can still be false. Does this better explain the kind of inference at work in linguistic communication? This is not necessarily the case. There is no principled reason to deny that just because the inferences made in the process of utterance interpretation are *non-demonstrative* (or not foolproof), they cannot be at least partly deductive.

Moreover, the challenge of explaining what kind of inference takes place in utterance interpretation is complicated by a range of other factors. Firstly, the kind of beliefs and assumptions that act as premises are not simply true or false, as they are in classical logic, but are held with a varying degree of strength or weakness. Secondly, while logic books introduce inference using the staged, step-by-step arguments in (8) and (9), the kind of inference involved in utterance interpretation appears to be spontaneous and fast. Implicatures are not arrived at laboriously; they are derived in an instant. Thirdly and finally, appealing to one particular form of inference – whether it be deduction, induction or **abduction** – is to say nothing about the much more complex question of how the premises themselves are chosen from the potentially infinite number of beliefs or assumptions available. An account of utterance interpretation must constrain very tightly the number of plausible candidates.

Turning to the issue of theory of mind, there has been a huge amount of recent psychological research on the capacity for mental-state attribution among humans and non-human animals. It seems clear that the kind of metarepresentational abilities at work in utterance interpretation are related to this wider meta-psychological ability (Allen and Bekoff 1997; Baron-Cohen 1995;

Happé 1994). However, there are a variety of reasons to believe that there is much more to the processes at work in an act of utterance interpretation than general mind-reading abilities.

The principal reason is that it is often the case that what makes it possible for an individual to attribute an intention to another is observing not only their behaviour but also the consequences of their behaviour. Observing someone climbing a tree and rescuing a cat, we may infer that their intention in climbing that tree was to rescue the cat; observing someone jumping over a fence and picking some flowers, we may infer that their intention in jumping over the fence was to pick some flowers. In contrast to this, the only clue an audience has to the content of the complex intention which constitutes a speaker's meaning is the fact that the speaker has produced a certain utterance which falls far short of determining what he or she intends to convey. Until the hearer has understood the speaker's meaning, the speaker's behaviour will have no observable consequences from which his or her intentions can be inferred: the hearer can't *first* observe the effect of an utterance and *then* infer what it meant.

These and other problems suggest that utterance interpretation might be carried out by a specialized, domain-specific comprehension mechanism or module, which may form a sub-part of theory of mind (Sperber 2000; Sperber and Wilson 2002; Wilson 2005; Wilson and Sperber 2002). Seen this way, the process of utterance interpretation is characterized in terms of the automatic operation of an evolved, sub-conscious procedure or **heuristic** (Gigerenzer and Todd 1999). This can be contrasted with the traditional view of the process of utterance interpretation Grice envisaged (though see Grice 2001), in which it is characterized in terms of conscious, reflective inferences.

See also: Animal communication, pragmatics of; conversation; disambiguation; explicit/implicit distinction; Grice, H.P.; implicature; implicature; indexicals; inference; inferential comprehension; meaning; modular pragmatics; modularity of mind hypothesis; neo-Gricean pragmatics; philosophy of language; post-Gricean pragmatics; pragmatics; proposition; radical pragmatics; rationality; reasoning; semantics-pragmatics interface; what is said

Suggestions for further reading:

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