



Speaker's intended meaning and addressee's intended meaning

Marco Cruciani
University of Trento
(cruciani@disi.unitn.it)

Introduction

Some important theories in philosophy, linguistics and cognitive science share the idea that full understanding of communication requires understanding the role of the non-linguistic knowledge tied to the situation in which a sentence is uttered. Pragmatists and semanticists have given rise to numerous standpoints about different aspects related to the context-dependence of meaning and to communicative processes – e.g. indexicality, reference assignment, semantic underdeterminacy, mind-reading, ad hoc concepts construction, mutual adjustment and backward/forward inference, implicature vs. explicature, inferential vs. associative method, etc. (Stanley, 2000; Récanati, 2004; Szabó, 2005; Cappelen, 2007; Carston, 2007; Wilson & Carston, 2007; Recanati, 2010; Bach, 2010; Mazzone, 2011; Wilson & Sperber 2012; Borg, 2012; Stalnaker, 2014; Hall 2014). For the purpose of the paper, it is relevant the debate concerning the nature of the “primary” pragmatic processes, that are, the processes that contribute to the recovery of the explicit meaning of a sentence.¹

Speaker's intended/addressee's intended meaning

The paper presents a model of explicit communication, where the notion of shared intended meaning is based on the speaker's preference for a state of affairs to which a sentence refers, and on the addressee's communicative inference, which involves the addressee's belief about the interest of speaker in the specific communicative situation. The two main thesis are in the following: 1) given a set of contextually plausible interpretations of a sentence, the speaker's intended meaning is determined by the speaker's situational interests, and 2) the addressee's intended meaning is inferred by addressee on the basis of his/her belief about the speaker's interest. Communication is successful when the intended speaker's meaning and addressee's speaker meaning are shared, that is, when the addressee's inference is based on a true belief about speaker's interest in situation.

The paper takes the notion of interest from cognitive social theory, that is, an interest is viewed as a state of affairs preferred by a speaker because it implies the conditions of possibility of his/her goal (Conte & Castelfranchi, 1995). Also, the paper takes the notion of meaning from analytic philosophy of language, that is, the sentence meaning identifies with the truth-conditions of sentence, and the meaning of an expression identifies with its contribution

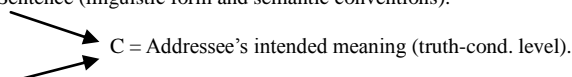
¹ Cf. Carston (2002) on the notion of explicature in Relevant Theory; Récanati (2001) on 'what is said' in Truth-conditional pragmatics; Bach (2010) on implicature in linguistics.



to the truth value of the sentence in which it appears (Tarski, 1944).

Speaker's intended meaning – The notion of speaker's intended meaning of declarative sentences is founded on the relation between the states of affairs in which a sentence is true and the speaker's preferences ordering in regard to the states of affairs in which the sentence is true. A sentence can be true with respect to different sets of truth-conditions, which correspond to different states of affairs. The state of affairs preferred by a speaker because it implies his/her goal provides the truth-conditions which determine the speaker's intended meaning in the specific situation of use. From this perspective, the determination of speaker's intended meaning is viewed as a selection of a state of affairs which makes a sentence true (via truth conditions) and satisfies the speaker's interest in situation. Hence, the process of determining speaker's intended meaning can be explained in terms of preferences ordering. *Addressee's intended meaning* – The addressee's intended meaning is obtained via a communicative inference (see below). The premise P_1 consists of a sentence and the semantic conventions associate to its linguistic form (that is, some semantically plausible meanings). The premise P_2 consists of the addressee's belief about the speaker's interest, more specifically about a partial ordering of speaker's preferences.

P_1 = Sentence (linguistic form and semantic conventions).



P_2 = Belief (speaker's interest).

Fig.1 – Communicative inference.

Interest and belief in communicative inferences

Consider the following sentence taken from the pragmatist literature (Carston, 2007): 1) **“I’m going to the bank now to get some cash”**. At first glance, here the interpretative problem consists in identifying a referent for the word “bank” (‘financial institution’ or ‘river side’). Let us base our interpretation on the approach of Récanati’s Truth-conditional pragmatics. In this case it would be plausible to assume that the referent ‘financial institution’ is assigned to the word “bank” because it is associated with the concept ‘cash’ triggered by the word “cash”, or because it is associated with the stereotypical representation ‘getting money from a bank’ (or with both). This association is made possible by the discourse (or linguistic) context, i.e. the part of the sentence in which the expression “to get some cash” appears, and by the shared encyclopaedic knowledge that, in general, money is withdrawn from banks. But this is not necessarily the intended interpretation, even though it is the most immediate one.

Consider the case in which (1) is uttered by an angler who is going fishing and who intends to sell the fish that he catches. In this case, the encyclopaedic knowledge that money is withdrawn from banks is not relevant, but nor is the local knowledge that the speaker is a ‘professional’ fisherman able to disambiguate the word “bank” (because also fishermen go to the bank). Instead, if we know the speaker’s interests – for example, that he intends to sell the fish that he catches in order to earn money, or that he intends to withdraw money in order to go shopping – then we are able to



identify the intended referent in both the former and the latter case. We are able to do so on the basis of the knowledge shared between speaker and addressee about the speaker's interest, and not on the basis of conceptual associations produced by the addressee. Presented below is the scheme of the inferential process whereby the addressee determines the meaning of (1):

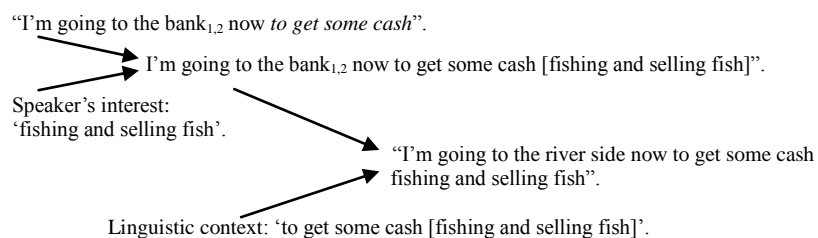


Fig. 2 – Process of meaning determination.

In interpretation of (1), the shared knowledge of the speaker's interest enables determination of the meaning of the expression "to get some cash" ('sell fish') which then allows assign of the reference for the word "bank" ('river side'). Hence, the interest (via enrichment) has determined (i) the contribution of the expression "to get some cash" to the truth-conditions of the sentence, and accordingly (ii) the relevant linguistic context for disambiguation of "bank" in the specific situation.

In summary, the speaker intends the meaning that maximizes his/her interest in situation, and the addressee infers the meaning on the basis of his/her belief about the speaker's partial order of preferences. When the addressee has a true belief about the partial order of preferences, we have shared intended meaning, that is, a real communication.

References

- Bach, K. (2010). Implicature vs explicature: What's the difference? In Romero E. e Soria B. (a cura di) *Explicit communication*. NY: Palgrave.
- Borg, E. (2012). *Pursuing Meaning*. Oxford: OUP.
- Carston, R. (2002). Linguistic meaning, communicated meaning and cognitive pragmatics. *Mind and Language*, 17, (1-2), 127-148.
- Carston, R. (2007). How many pragmatic systems are there? In M. Frappolli (a cura di) *Saying, meaning, referring*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 18-48.
- Conte, R., e Castelfranchi, C. (1995). *Cognitive and social action*. Londra: Univ. College.
- Hall, A. (2014) 'Free' enrichment and the nature of pragmatic constraints". *International Review of Pragmatics* 6, (1), 1-28.
- Mazzone, M. (2011). Schemata and associative processes in pragmatics. *J. of Pragmatics* 43 (8): 2148-59.
- Récanati, F. (2001). What is said. *Synthese*, 128, 75-91.
- Récanati, F. (2004). *Literal meaning*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Récanati, F. (2010). *Truth conditional pragmatics*. Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- Sperber, D. e Wilson, D. (2002) Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading. *Mind & Language* 17: 3-23.
- Stalnaker, R. (2014) *Context*. Oxford: OUP.
- Stanley, J. (2000). Context and logical form. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 25: 701-21.
- Szabó, Z. (a cura di) (2005) *Semantics Vs. pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP.
- Tarski, A. (1944). The semantic conception of truth and the foundation of semantics. *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, 4, 341-56.
- Wilson, D. e Sperber, D. (2012). *Meaning and relevance*. Cambridge: CUP.