

Delimitation of Pragmatics: Paradigms, Myths and Fashions.

A Response to Bara

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Bloomfield's (1933) *Language*, Sapir's articles on language, anthropology and psychology (1949) belong to an era in which linguists could still deliver a 'story about everything', everything about language, about the areas and levels of linguistic analysis, that is worth knowing, researching, and recording for posterity. But with this extraordinary scope also came a refined, new outlook, the paradigm that pushes forward the horizons of language sciences. Following the cognitive revolution, we have had more specialised debates that addressed either one problem, area, level or orientation, or interfaces and interactions, such as that between syntax and semantics, semantics and pragmatics, or syntax and pragmatics. Carving the field large or small is equally sound, provided it is dictated by objectives that match the assumed scope. What is not sound is carving the field large, having no paradigm to match, and instead giving in to a medley of fashions and trends. Despite the impressive experimental and theoretical work in clinical psychology reported in his other works, Bruno Bara's recent overview of what he calls 'cognitive pragmatics' (Bara 2011) falls in the camp of slaves to fashion, for the reasons I explain in what follows.

Pragmatics has very respectable roots in philosophical writings of ordinary language philosophers of the Anglo-American tradition, and even further into the past, in the phenomenological writings in continental Europe.¹ One of the foci of attention was properties

¹ For the purpose of this brief response bibliographical data are unimportant. Suffice it to say that the core players here are Husserl, Brentano, Twardowski, Austin, Searle, Wittgenstein, among many others. See pertinent sections of Jaszczolt 1999.

of mental states – or mental acts, acts of consciousness, and their role in a theory of meaning. Intentionality, the ‘aboutness’ of mental acts, directs them at an object, be it real or itself mental, at the same time securing a meaning relation. Language exhibits this intentionality either because it is derived, imposed on an utterance act by the mind (see Searle 1983: 26-28 on double level of intentionality) or because intentionality belongs to language inherently since language is one of the vehicles of thought (Jaszczolt 1999: 104-111). Next, the emphasis shifts to acts of communication and the search for principles behind communicating speaker’s intentions. Hence we witness the inquiries into locutionary force and its properties (e.g. Searle and Vanderveken 1985), types and properties of intentions in communication (e.g. Bach and Harnish 1979; Sperber and Wilson 1996), and finally, the what is said/what is conversationally implicated distinction (Grice, in 1989 and various schools of post-Griceans), where the formal approach to meaning re-emerges, obfuscating what looked like a clear paradigm shift from formal, truth-conditional approaches to use- and conversational-success-governed ones.

Against the background of this celebrated tradition, Bara brings in a medley of discourse analysis, clinical psychology, neuropragmatics, philosophical pragmatics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, language development studies, cultural studies, functional linguistics, and even history of writing, not shunning many other areas of intellectual pursuit, all on forty two pages – a medley that, its respectable origins notwithstanding, results in a reader’s digest of platitudes and clichés. The article opens with the following statement of purpose (Bara 2011: 443), lifted directly from his book of the same title (Bara 2010), which I quote in full, having divided it into what appears to pertain to interrelated but distinguishable ideas:

[1] The basic idea behind this work is that communication is essentially a cooperative activity between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed by all those actors together engaged in the shared task of reciprocally attending to the other communicants’ words.

[2] The aims of the actors engaged in an interaction may differ, but to be able to say that communication has taken place successfully, all the participants must share a set of mental states.

[3] The responsibility for communication falls on the shoulders of each and every participant, for they act together in order to realize communication.

[4] Focusing on stereotypical roles such as speaker and hearer, or emitter and receiver, confounds the issue by fragmenting into isolated blocks, an activity that acquires meaning precisely from being global and collective.

[5] Moreover, I shall claim that human beings, unique among animals, possess a basic communicative competence that sustains both the linguistic and the extralinguistic way of expressing it.

[6] Furthermore, if we are to speak of communication and not simply of information transmission, then agents must devote themselves *intentionally* to such common activity.

Statements [1] and [3] are merely a curtsey to Grice's writings and will raise no eyebrows.

But [2] seems to ignore the difference between mutual knowledge that could arguably be measured in the 'overlap' of the intentional mental states of the interlocutors with what we can dub 'sufficient similarity', allowing for some departures in referentiality, linguistic vagueness, or innocuous neglect in processing where, say, disambiguation, resolution of underdetermined linguistic message, is not always necessary in order to capture the speaker's intentions. Next, [4] purports to be an essential item of criticism levied at various extant pragmatic approaches, in that they allegedly tend to focus on the speaker and his/her intended meaning, or the addressee and his/her recovered meaning, instead of on the very process of conversational interaction. But on a careful reading of Grice this does not hold water. Grice's Co-operative Principle and its maxims do not purport to give a cognitive access into individual speakers and their intentions; instead, they constitute an attempted summary of rational behaviour of rational, model speakers, using a theoretical construct of an intention (of different levels of embedding) as a definiens for an abstract concept of an abstract speaker's meaning (meaning_{NN}). Moreover, post-Gricean approaches made considerable progress in researching the domain that Grice's philosophical writing did not delve into, namely the addressee's cognitive processes that govern comprehension.² Post-Gricean developments have also made considerable progress in modelling a rational speaker's

² Relevance theory leads the way here. See also Jaszczolt and Allan 2011 for other approaches.

cognitive processes associated with predicting the very act of collaboration in constructing meaning that Bara is anxious to bring to the forefront: conscious inference juxtaposed with unconscious, automatic enrichment of the coded message, reliance on shortcuts in processing, on the aspects of intended meaning that can be taken for granted as parts of shared cultural or social legacy, are all focal parts of current in-depth discussions, which Bara neglects to give credit to or acknowledge.³ In this light, [5] and [6] reiterate the obvious.

Cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals and intentions (cf. Bara 2010: 1). To repeat, the objective is to approach conversation ‘from within’, rather than *post hoc*, and capture the associated processes. This is, however, not a task for one single discipline. It is not a task that can be accomplished within one paradigm and using one metalanguage. Studying conversation from within has many facets that are best approached within the remits of their respective disciplines. For example, psychology of processing will result in a categorically different insight than ethnomethodological investigations of conversation analysis, although both approach conversation ‘from within’ – *pace* Bara who considers this perspective to be part of a novel pragmatic approach. Bara’s manifesto is to explain ‘how each communication act is generated mentally’ instead of focusing on a ‘finished product’ (2011: 443). But the ‘pick and mix’ approach is not going to push the frontiers forward. Another problem is that Bara’s reading of philosophers of language often does not do justice to their ideas; Frege, Russell, or even Grice, may not have been searching for language processing models, indeed, Frege is even famous for banning psychologism from logic and mathematics⁴, but by attempting to apply deductive reasoning and deductive logic with its precise languages to the analysis of

³ Albeit not always through the lack of familiarity, rather through misinterpretation – see his 2010. The literature on utterance processing and within it on co-construction of meaning is vast. On the types of enrichment in communicating the main intended message, which assumes an active participation of the addressee, see e.g. Recanati 2004; Jaszczolt 2005. On types and roles of intentions in communication see e.g. Haugh and Jaszczolt 2012.

⁴ I wrote about it at length in Jaszczolt 2008, this journal.

meaning in natural language, be it expression of coreference, sentential connectives, conditional thought, or many other areas, they paved the way towards hypotheses about language processing. The very idea of sense and reference is founded on the distinction between objects and guises, modes of presentation of the object, which are shared and intersubjective but at the same time mental, acting as mental substitutes for reference in semantically problematic, non-extensional contexts. To take another simple example, Grice's defence of material conditional comes from his discussion of how interlocutors use conditional constructions; to what ends, with what intentions, and *pace* Bara, with what expectations: one has to be able to predict what will happen with one's message in the communication channel. In acknowledging the importance of this dynamic aspect of meaning, pragmaticists did not wait for Bara's pseudo-programmatic statement (1). Further evidence for the forefront position of conversational interaction can be provided from the studies of collaborative intentions, dynamic semantics such as Discourse Representation Theory (and in particular Segmented Discourse Representation Theory), Dynamic Predicate Logic, experimental pragmatics of generalised implicature processing, turn-taking of Conversation Analysis, and other diversified orientations and frameworks. These approaches go far beyond the stage of a directive: they have models, arguments, and use metalanguages in their own right. CA proved itself as a valuable method (albeit perhaps not explanatorily adequate or theoretically rigorous) when applied to natural conversation, while dynamic semantics such as DRT or SDRT offers formal analyses of meaning of discourses where formal representations enjoy the status of mental representations. It is true that the departure from the sentence as the ready and static object of study has often been too slow, with the logical form of the sentence lurking somewhere as a springboard (see here the debates on enrichment, modulation, primary and secondary meaning in post-Gricean literature), but it has definitely been achieved.

In this light, what is unquestionably commendable is Bara's very emphasis on dialogue as opposed to a single sentence or a single speech act, the focus on 'language game', and the argument for a modality-independent intentionality network in the brain. Although, as I indicated above, these observations share a lot with the ethnomethodological tradition of conversation analysis (CA) on the one hand (cf. Bara's Section 3 on moves in 'playing a game'), and the state-of-the-art research on the semantics of dialogue (and dynamic semantics in general) on the other, at the current stage of theoretical and experimental pragmatics emphasising dynamicity and structure of discourse is not yet an overkill.⁵

Next, stressing the importance of evidence from the acquisition of conversational skills (or, 'acquisition of pragmatic competence'), Bara points out that an adequate theory would find support in neurosciences, and in particular in neuropragmatics. This is, however, a requirement that can easily be misused. Firstly, while the term 'neuropragmatics' has a relatively short history, it has already helped delineate a fast-developing subdiscipline – a fact that Bara fails to exploit, in spite of having contributed to it abundantly himself (see e.g. Bara *et al.* 1997 for early work). To list a few sample areas where considerable progress has been made, there is evidence that brain systems for action and perception contribute to language processing, for example the meaning of action-related expressions correlates with maps of brain activation ('somatotopy of action semantics', Pulvermüller and Fadiga 2010; Pulvermüller 2011); electrophysiological evidence for automatic vs. conscious stages of sentence processing (Hahne and Friederici 1999); arguments and some evidence that recursion is a discourse-based rather than syntax-based (narrow-faculty-of-language-based) phenomenon, aptly summarised in Arsenijević and Hinzen (2010); related to it, evidence that neural networks involved in processing of hierarchies in linguistic and non-linguistic domains contain some of the same sub-components (Friederici *et al.* 2011) and, analogously, evidence

⁵ For DRT and SDRT see Kamp and Reyle 1993 and Asher and Lascarides 2003, respectively.

in support of interactive, not structure-based, compositionality that I discuss below (Pylikkänen 2008); or for example partial evidence that different semantic mechanisms govern different classes of words (different neuronal circuits and brain topographies for action words, object words, sound words, emotion words, Pulvermüller 2011). Unfortunately, Bara's delimitation of cognitive pragmatics is a rather long shot from such developments in neurolinguistics. Among the misconceptions and misconstruals one has to mention Bara's claim that while linguistic communication is compositional, extralinguistic communication is associative. Language corresponds to a system of symbols, while, say, a pirouette in ballet has 'parts but not constituents' (2011: 445). One would rejoice in being able to share this innocent optimism; instead, as is well known, intensional contexts are a stumbling block for any semantics that makes compositionality its methodological goal, unless we step out of language and shift the compositionality requirement somewhere outside language system, say, to (i) communication that includes precisely the extralinguistic aspects Bara talks about (cf. Recanati's 2004 'Gestaltist' compositionality, also employed in Default Semantics, Jaszczolt 2005, 2010) or to (ii) the worldly, referential properties on which semantics supervenes, to mention here Fodor's (2008) *LOT2* or Schiffer (e.g. 1991). In short, linguistic communication is far from compositional on the level of the system itself; communication is only compositional when we include both linguistic and extralinguistic components – the latter, *pace* Bara, often compositional in their own right.⁶

Contra Bara, not only don't we have a compositional language system⁷ but, on the other hand, gestures have been argued to be a no weaker contender to the property of compositional semantics than linguistic expressions. Of course, saying what one means by

⁶ Of course, one can call a system of gestures or a ritual dance a 'language'. But it is clear from Bara's examples (2010, 2011) that it is not the view he holds of 'linguistic' and 'extralinguistic' or of what is 'systematic' and 'associative'.

⁷ Natural language semantic can only be considered compositional when compositionality is adopted as a methodological assumption and the metalanguage (its syntax or semantics) is adjusted accordingly in order to achieve this effect (see Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991).

‘language’ and what by ‘extralinguistic communication’ would not go amiss here. As it stands, the only defence of the division would be by making the argument circular: when communication is *systematic* (and by definition compositional?) it is called *linguistic*, and therefore language is compositional, and analogously for *extralinguistic* and *associative*. But this of course won’t suffice. In short, if the methodological requirement of compositionality can be realised for semantic theory of natural language by adjusting the syntax or the semantics of the metalanguage, then the same goes for meaningful gestures.⁸ In short, compositionality is not a property that distinguishes the linguistic from the non-linguistic but rather a property of communication that subsumes them both. There is, for example, neurolinguistic evidence that complement coercion, where there is a type mismatch (‘John began the poem’, where the salient *event* of writing, reading, memorizing, etc. a poem is reported) involves a region of the frontal lobe of the brain that is not normally associated with linguistic processing (Pylkkänen 2008). The results show that there is unusual brain activity in performing a type shift and therefore suggest that it would be prudent to make any compositional account of meaning reflect it.

Secondly, it has to be stressed that in drawing evidence from neuroimaging one has to be rather cautious. The ideal would be to find neuronal structures that correlate with *linguistic representations*, and patterns of neuronal activations that correlate with *linguistic processing*. But experimental design to test brain correlates that can be used in linguistic theory is very restrictive. Testing, say, for ambiguity vs. underspecification, or literal force and indirectness in speech acts, has to control for many factors and at present we can’t go far beyond lexical pragmatics and very simple scenarios (see Pulvermüller 2010). Further danger lies in frequent haphazard superimposing of the objectives of clinical psychology onto the discipline of pragmatics. Pulvermüller (2010: 279:280) puts it thus:

⁸ Lascarides and Stone (2006, 2009) also point out the role of gestures in the ‘glue logic’, that is in establishing the rhetorical structure of discourse.

Collecting wisdom about new plants, stars, and brain activation loci can advance a field in a hunter-gatherer sense. In order for it to transform into an explanatory science, *explanations* need to be offered (...). In the neuroscience of language, these explanations use neuroscience facts and established principles of brain structure and function as *explanans*. It is in this explanatory domain where, in my view, further progress is most desperately needed. (...) An important achievement, now and in the future, may therefore be neuromechanistic explanations detailing *why* specific brain areas are necessary for, or light up and index, specific facets of language processing, *how* neuronal ensembles and distributed areas become activated with precisely timed milli-second delays, and which precise neuronal wirings can potentially account for neurometabolic activation of specific cortical clusters in semantic understanding.

Explanation of the kind stipulated by Pulvermüller presupposes a rigorous theoretical pragmatics, to avoid what he aptly dubs ‘hunter-gatherer-style wisdom’. It seems that what Bara is offering is a ‘hunter-gatherer’, or ‘pick and mix’ commentary on some selected *aspects of human communication* (a title that would better describe the enterprise) rather than a contribution within the discipline of Cognitive Pragmatics that would withstand the above caution. The scope and versatility notwithstanding, ‘hunter-gatherer wisdom’ it is.

Turning to merits, Bara rightly supports the claim that the literal/nonliteral distinction does not survive in the face of the contextualist construal of meaning. Pragmaticists are still too eager to hold on to the concept of the literal meaning, proposition expressed by the sentence, and contrast it with the enriched/modulated proposition, as well as with various propositions corresponding to implicated content (Carston 1988, 2002; Recanati 1989, 2004). This artificial construal should definitely be abandoned in favour of intention-driven primary content and here Bara’s theoretically innocent defence of this view plays an important part. In this context, however, some claims would benefit from clarification and experimental support. For example, Bara puts forward definitions of a ‘simple’ and a ‘complex’ communication act, where the first is founded on what he calls ‘one single inferential step’ and the latter on an ‘inferential chain’ (p.464). As in the example of linguistic and extralinguistic communication discussed above, we have here definitions devoid of content: surely, simple is single, and complex is multiple. But the *ignotum per ignotius* definition will not do: how does one measure a single step? If one could, then calling it in addition ‘a simple

act' would be redundant by definition. Likewise, attention to what is meant by 'rule' or 'norm' would not go amiss.

Returning to the question of the scope and discipline-mixing, sociolinguistics, relations between players in a game, cultural relativism, are also swept into the discussion – leading, alas, to the conclusion that one would hardly consider controversial or worth testing, namely that '[c]onversation is not so much a game of table tennis, in which agents alternatively exchange information, as a communal and simultaneous effort to build something together.' (p. 461). One would be very much surprised if every toddler were not discovering this fact, without Bara's help. Later on in life, in the process of the acquisition of pragmatic skills, no doubt, one also acquires the strategies of putting these skills to 'nonstandard' use, such as exploitation in irony, deceit, or unintentional misuse (failure), or dissociation from expressing intentions – nothing new to be identified in Bara's extensive treatment of these topics either.

The discussion that develops from this sociolinguistic enquiry leads Bara to the following methodological statement: 'A theory able to predict errors that occur during a process is to be praised over theories that can predict only correct responses.' (pp. 472-3). Here Bara singles out relevance theory for allegedly being the only one that addresses conversational success and failure. This is, however, a result of mistaking the perspective on discourse with the ability to address failure. Once a theory assumes the vantage point of the addressee, the miscommunication naturally falls within its remit. It could never fall in the remit of Grice's intention-driven construal and hence criticism does not apply, as was aptly demonstrated by Saul 2002 and addressed in Default Semantics. The latter, for the same reason as Grice's approach, is tangential to the problem in that it adopts a Model Speaker perspective (Jaszczolt, e.g. 2005, 2010). In any case, Bara's unprincipled hopping between perspectives, fields, and also between taxonomies yet again testifies to the 'hunters-gatherers

method', to mention only the haphazard collection of 'exploitation', 'deception', 'failure', 'nonexpressive use of utterances' listed under one heading as if the terms followed one principle of classification.

To conclude: as was observed at the beginning, the history of linguistic thought can boast masterpieces that comprise all levels and many aspects of analysis of language, as well as works dedicated to a level of linguistic analysis that have become equally important landmarks in the field, to compare only de Saussure with, say, Montague Semantics. However, making cognitive pragmatics a study of very nearly any aspect of language use will not do. Piling up comments on social use of language, evolution of writing, developmental linguistics, cultural relativism, language acquisition, neuroscience, will not sum up in a methodologically rigorous 'cognitive pragmatics'.

I have also mentioned some dangers connected with employing neuroscience in the service of pragmatics: one has to be cautious in accepting nerve circuits and patterns of activation as brain correlates of linguistic processes and representations; it is not enough just to look. As Legrenzi and Umiltà (2011) forewarn, neuroscience is in danger of being appropriated to serve in pseudoexplanations for various kinds of human intellectual activity: neuropolitics, neurotheology, neuroeconomics, or neuroaesthetics. It is important that employing it for the purpose of cognitive pragmatics is not just one of such trends, fashions and crazes within the all-pervading 'neuromania' but instead follows a rigorous path of finding true empirical correlations.⁹

In short, there is no doubt that communication needs to be investigated 'from within', but on a careful reading of phenomenologists talking about intentionality and about 'social acts', the speech-acts theorists that followed, as well as Grice and post-Griceans, this

⁹ They report on a study conducted at Yale University in which bad explanations of a phenomenon were presented to subjects accompanied by neuroscientific 'evidence'. The outcome was that the bad explanation was then considered to be credible. In the authors' words (2011: 60), neuroscience has 'the power of redemption': 'The general public tends to misunderstand the addition of neuroscience which, as a consequence, has the power to transform an unsatisfactory explanation into a satisfactory one'.

emphasis on mental acts and dynamism of communication proves not to be so novel after all. Bara's account only proves that there is a long way to go before this 'inside-out' perspective is fully explored and appreciated, and here his cognitive pragmatics and the list of assumptions it comes with is very useful indeed. By muddying the waters somewhat in putting together various ideas from various fields of learning, Cognitive Pragmatics may eventually trigger a search for a paradigm and metalanguage, and, first of all, clearly delineated playing field, so the progress continues. But this 'hunter-gatherer', 'pick and mix' approach of haphazard juxtapositions of problems and areas will not do.

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