

SEMANTICS-PRAGMATICS INTERFACE (2,432 words)

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Semantics and **pragmatics** have both developed sophisticated methods of analysis of **meaning**. The question to address is whether their objects of study can be teased apart or whether each sub-discipline accounts for different contributions (in the sense of qualitatively different outputs or different types of processes) that produce one unique object called ‘meaning’. Traditionally, semantics was responsible for compositionally construed sentence meaning, in which the meanings of lexical items and the structure in which they occur were combined. The best developed approach to sentence meaning is undoubtedly truth-conditional semantics. Its formal methods permit the translation of vague and ambiguous sentences of natural language into a precise metalanguage of predicate logic and provide a model-theoretic interpretation to so construed **logical forms**. Pragmatics was regarded as a study of utterance meaning, and hence meaning in **context**, and was therefore an enterprise with a different object of study. However, the boundary between them began to be blurred, giving rise to the so-called semantic underdetermination view. Semantic underdetermination was a revolutionary idea for the theory of linguistic meaning. It was a reaction to generative semantics of the 1960s and 1970s which attempted to give syntactic explanations to inherently pragmatic phenomena. We have to note the importance of the Oxford ordinary language philosophers (John L. Austin, H. Paul Grice, Peter F. Strawson) and Ludwig Wittgenstein in Cambridge in the late phase of his work, and subsequently the work of Gerald Gazdar, Bruce Fraser, Jerry Morgan, Jay Atlas, Ruth Kempson, Deirdre Wilson, Stephen Levinson, Larry Horn, and many others, in opening up the way for the study of pragmatic **inference** and its contribution to truth-

conditional **representation**, now understood as Gricean, intended meaning with intuitive truth-conditions. These individuals include the Oxford ordinary language philosophers (John L. **Austin**, H. Paul **Grice** and Peter F. Strawson), the late Ludwig **Wittgenstein** in Cambridge, and subsequently the work of Gerald Gazdar, Bruce Fraser, Jerry Morgan, Jay Atlas, Ruth Kempson, Deirdre Wilson, Stephen Levinson, Larry Horn, and many others. I list below some important landmarks.

Grice (1978) remarked that pragmatic processes of **disambiguation** and **reference** assignment to **indexical** expressions sometimes have to be taken into consideration before the sentence's truth conditions can be assessed. At the same time, Kempson (1975, 1979, 1986) and Atlas (1977, 1979, 1989) suggested that **negation** in English should not be regarded as ambiguous between narrow-scope and wide-scope as Bertrand Russell had proposed, but was instead semantically underdetermined. In other words, the celebrated example (1) is not semantically ambiguous between (1') and (1'') but instead the scope of negation is pragmatically determined in each particular utterance on the basis of the recovery of the speaker's **intentions**.

(1) The king of France is not bald.

(1') $\exists x (\text{KoF}(x) \wedge \forall y (\text{KoF}(y) \rightarrow y = x) \wedge \neg \text{Bald}(x))$

(1'') $\neg \exists x (\text{KoF}(x) \wedge \forall y (\text{KoF}(y) \rightarrow y = x) \wedge \text{Bald}(x))$

(1') is a presupposing reading: there is a person who fulfils the property of being the king of France, there is only one such person, and whoever fulfils this property is not bald. The reading in (1'') is non-presupposing: the king of France is *not* bald because

there is no such person. Since (1') entails (1''), the semantic underdetermination (sense-generality) view has both formal and cognitive support: the logical forms in (1') and (1'') are not disjoint and (1') and (1'') do not correspond to separate, independent thoughts. A battery of tests was proposed in order to tell **ambiguity** and underdetermination apart (Zwicky and Sadock 1975; see also Jaszczolt 1999). The boundary became more and more blurred. Linguists began to adopt the underdetermination stance to an increasing set of expression types and we can talk about the beginning of an orientation called **radical pragmatics** (Cole 1981), sense-generality (Atlas 1989), or **contextualism** (Recanati 2004, 2005). According to this view, semantic analysis takes us only part of the way towards the recovery of utterance meaning and pragmatic **enrichment** completes this process. In other words, the logical form becomes enriched (or, to use a more general term, modulated; see Recanati 2004, 2005) as a result of pragmatic inference and the entire semantic-pragmatic product becomes subjected to the truth-conditional analysis (see, for example, Carston 1988, 1998, 2002; Atlas 1989, 2005; Wilson 1975; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Recanati 1989, 2004, 2005). For example, sentence (2) is normally enriched with the consequence sense of *and* before being subjected to the truth-conditional analysis as in (2').

- (2) Tom dropped the vase and it broke.
- (2') Tom dropped the vase *and as a result* it broke.

This widening of the content of semantic representation resulted in the reallocation of some of the meanings which Grice classified as implicit to the truth-conditional content of the utterance. One of the main research questions now became to delimit

the scope of such an enriched, truth-conditional representation, called **what is said** (Recanati 1989) or explicature (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Carston 1988) vis-à-vis **implicatures**. Carston (1988) argued that enrichment stops as soon as optimal relevance (in the sense of **relevance theory** of Sperber and Wilson) is reached. She proposed that a criterion for classification is provided by the functional independence principle, according to which implicatures have their own, independent logical forms and they function as separate premises in **reasoning**. Identifying some problems with the formal definition of functional independence, Recanati (1989) offered the availability principle. According to this principle, an aspect of meaning is part of what is said when it conforms to our pre-theoretic intuitions (but see Carston's 1998 response).

Another aspect of the post-Gricean boundary dispute concerns the so-called 'middle level' of meaning. For Kent Bach (1994, 2001; also Horn 2006), there is what is said and what is implicated. However, there is also part of an utterance's content that he believes is implicit in what is said. People often speak loosely, non-literally, and it is more efficient to do so because inference is fast, while speech production is relatively slow. For example, (3) may be uttered by a mother comforting a child who cut his finger (from Bach 1994: 267). But what the mother meant was not the content of the sentence alone (the minimal **proposition** in (3')) but instead an expansion in (3'').

- (3) You are not going to die, Peter.
- (3') There is no future time at which you will die, Peter.
- (3'') You are not going to die from this cut, Peter.

Similarly, utterances of sentences which are semantically incomplete, although they correspond to complete syntactic forms, such as (4), are further completed to reflect the speaker's meaning, as for example in (4').

(4) Bill is not good enough.

(4') Bill is not a good enough singer to be a chorister in King's College Choir.

Such expansions and completions are neither what is said nor implicatures: they are **implicatures** in that they are implicit in what is said. They constitute the middle level of meaning, while the label 'what is said' is reserved for what is explicitly uttered. Next, Levinson (1995, 2000) also proposes a middle level of meaning, but he founds it on very different principles, taking into consideration the **modularity** issue. Levinson discusses utterance-type meanings, so-called presumptive (**default**) interpretations, which are arrived at without the help of context. For example, (2') above is for him such a presumptive meaning, the result of the process of the generalized (context-free) conversational implicature. Such utterance-type meanings don't belong either to semantics or to pragmatics, where both are understood as separate modules producing one, single representation of meaning. Presumptive meanings belong to the middle level of conventions of language use.

An opposite tendency in this respect is represented by Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005), according to which a representation of utterance meaning is created as a merger of the output of a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic sources. These sources include word meaning and sentence structure, cognitive defaults (pertaining to the way our mental operations normally proceed), social-cultural defaults

(interpretations that are standard for the given **culture** and society), and conscious pragmatic inference. Merger representation is the only level of meaning and its construction does not give preference to any of the sources listed above, to the extent that the logical form of the uttered sentence may occasionally be replaced by an implicit form if that implicit proposition is the primary intended meaning. In other words, there is no syntactic constraint on the semantic representation and (3) above may on occasion give rise to, say, (3''').

(3''') There is nothing to worry about, Peter.

The composition of meaning proceeds according to the principles of pragmatic compositionality (Recanati 2004).

It can be safely said that the union of truth-conditional semantics with Gricean, intention-based pragmatics continued and developed without major paradigm shifts until the early years of the 21st century. The ‘intrusion’ of the output of pragmatic processes was largely taken for granted, even as the **explicit/implicit distinction** engendered many theoretical disputes and much experimental research (concerning, for example, the nature of pragmatic processes that produce what is said versus those that produce implicatures, and the automatic or inferential status of these processes). The field was mainly divided into those who accepted the default, automatic nature of the pragmatic enrichments of sentence meaning (e.g. Levinson 2000; Horn 2004; Recanati 2004, 2007; Jaszczolt 2005), albeit differentiated by associating different properties to default interpretations, and those for whom pragmatic additions are always inferential (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002, 2007), albeit on a very

liberal definition of the term ‘inferential’. Until this time, the characteristic that united post-Griceans was adherence to a stronger or weaker form of contextualism: the view that pragmatic processes influence the truth conditions of the utterance. This view was subsequently dubbed by Recanati ‘truth-conditional pragmatics’:

[V]arious contextual processes come into play in the determination of an utterance’s truth conditions; not merely saturation – the contextual assignment of values to indexicals and free variables in the logical form of the sentence – but also free enrichment and other processes which are not linguistically triggered but are pragmatic through and through. That view I will henceforth refer to as ‘Truth-conditional pragmatics’ (TCP).
(Recanati 2002: 302)

Opponents of this view include those who postulate slots in the syntactic representation of the sentence for each instance of pragmatic enrichment. For linguists of this orientation, pragmatic enrichment can be explained in terms of filling in slots in the logical form: ‘[m]uch syntactic structure is unpronounced, but no less real for being unpronounced’ (Stanley 2002: 152; see also Stanley and Szabo 2000; King and Stanley 2005). But it seems that the onus of proof lies on those who postulate such syntactic slots. With no compelling syntactic evidence or argumentation, it is a more supportable methodological move to assume that pragmatic enrichment can be free from syntactic constraints.

Recanati advocates a strong version of contextualism. On this view, contextual modulation is always present: there is no level of meaning which is truth-evaluable

and unaffected by top-down enrichment. The most radical of such contextualist stances is so-called meaning eliminativism. According to this position, meaning construction does not proceed through the stage of abstraction from past uses and formulation of a core, context-independent meaning, but instead is permeated by context-dependent modulation from the start – in the spirit of the late Wittgensteinian view of meaning as use.

This family of post-Gricean contextualist stances was challenged in the early years of the 21st century by so-called **semantic minimalism**, a view according to which the object of study of semantic theory should be strictly separated from post-Gricean intrusion of pragmatic processes. There are currently three versions of semantic minimalism: Emma Borg's (2004) minimal semantics, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore's (2005) insensitive semantics, and Kent Bach's (2004, 2006) radical semantic minimalism. Borg advocates modular semantics, governed by the rules of deduction, and distinguishes so-called 'liberal' truth conditions from verification conditions. The sentence 'The melon is red' is true if and only if the melon is red in some way or another, that is, either its skin or its flesh is red. The exact meaning, and the exact correspondence to the situation in the world that would make this sentence true, are the domain of verification conditions and fall outside the domain of semantic theory. Cappelen and Lepore offer a semantics of sentences according to which only those context-dependent expressions which are necessary for obtaining a complete semantic, truth-conditional representation are further specified. They propose a (short) list of such expressions, including personal pronouns, **demonstratives**, adverbs such as 'here', 'now', 'yesterday', adjectives like 'actual' and 'present', and tense indicators. A natural consequence of this minimalist construal of meaning is the

discrepancy between the object of study of semantic theory and the meaning of the speaker's utterance. This discrepancy is alleviated by supplementing minimal semantics with so-called speech act pluralism: each minimal representation may correspond to a wide variety of **speech acts** which it is capable of conveying. Finally, Bach offers the most radical form of semantic minimalism, according to which the semantic properties of the sentence should be regarded as analogous to its syntactic and phonological properties:

The semantics-pragmatics distinction is not fit to be blurred. What lies on either side of the distinction, the semantic and the pragmatic, may each be messy in various ways, but that doesn't blur the distinction itself. Taken as properties of sentences, semantic properties are on a par with syntactic and phonological properties: they are linguistic properties. Pragmatic properties, on the other hand, belong to acts of uttering sentences in the course of communicating. Sentences have the properties they have independently of anybody's act of uttering them. Speakers' intentions do not endow them with new semantic properties... (Bach 2004: 27).

On this construal, truth conditions are redundant as a tool because the object of study is not the proposition, not even in its minimal version, but the grammatical form itself. In other words, the completion of incomplete propositions such as (4) – so-called propositional radicals – does not fall within the domain of semantics: this would mean adopting propositionalism, which he strongly opposes and which he regards as a weakness of both Borg's and Cappelen and Lepore's accounts.

Several pertinent questions arise at this juncture of the semantics-pragmatics boundary dispute. The most important among them are perhaps (i) whether minimalism can be regarded as compatible with contextualism, each of them arguably having a distinct set of objectives and a distinct object of study; (ii) whether the powerful tool of truth conditions should be regarded as dispensable in semantics, as Bach suggests, but be applicable to freely enriched what is said, as contextualists have it; (iii) whether pragmatic contribution to what is said is conscious and inferential or automatic; and (iv) at what phase exactly does this pragmatic elaboration take place in utterance processing. We have to wait for future developments in the dispute to bring answers to these questions. Recent research also testifies to the shift from the narrowly construed semantics-pragmatics interface to more broadly conceived interfaces that involve **syntax**, sociology (in the sense of standard social practices governed by laws of economy and efficiency), anthropology, and **cognitive science**.

See also: Ambiguity; enrichment; generalized conversational implicature, theory of; neo-Gricean pragmatics; ordinary language philosophy; philosophy of language; post-Gricean pragmatics; radical pragmatics; semantic minimalism; underdeterminacy, linguistic

Suggestions for further reading:

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