The Role of Context in Interpreting Implicit Meaning Aspects

In my talk, I will propose that one source of information the interpretation process makes use of in determining the meaning of an utterance are conceptual frames which are evoked in the hearer by the expressions used in the utterance. The frames provide potential discourse referents in the form of thematic roles which may or may not get further specified in the course of interpreting an utterance or text. More generally, I want to suggest that the idea of conceptual frames being evoked during interpretation can be used to model (at least in part) a particular type of context, namely the ‘background’ against which a given utterance is interpreted. It is this background that provides the basis for understanding utterances as expressing more than what is explicitly stated (i.e. Relevance Theory’s explicature; Bach’s impliciture).

One particular group of implicit meaning aspects (IMAs) – Levinson’s (2000) I-implicatures – has been tested by Garrett and Harnish (2007, 2008, 2009). Their results indicate that I-implicatures arise out of any particular context and that they arise even in contexts where they clearly are not intended. These characteristics cannot be explained by an approach that assumes that IMAs are the result of a solely context-driven pragmatic process that takes into account assumptions concerning potential speaker intentions (e.g. Relevance Theory’s free enrichment process). In contrast, an approach where the interpretation of such IMAs is based on information from conceptual frames considered by default, does capture these characteristics.

Consider, e.g., (1), which – out of a context – is usually interpreted as expressing (2).

(1) John broke a finger.
(2) John broke his own finger.

According to FrameNet, the expression finger evokes the frame Observable_Bodypart with the core frame elements (FEs) Body-part and Possessor. John is an accessible discourse referent and an appropriate value for the Possessor-variable, whereas Body-part explicitly is specified as the finger mentioned. Thus, the two discourse referents introduced by the utterance of (1) can be identified with two particular FEs from the frame Observable_Bodypart and – due to the meaning relation holding between the latter – (1) is interpreted as expressing (2).

As suggested by Garrett and Harnish’s experimental results, in a context in which it is clear that it is not John’s finger that is broken, the specific IMA ‘his own finger’ is initially interpreted and has to get cancelled. This effect can be explained by the assumption that when an utterance such as (1) gets interpreted, the process that checks whether the Possessor FE of the evoked observable_bodypart frame might be identified with a discourse referent already available in the discourse context, operates locally. That is, it first checks on the most recently introduced, accessible discourse referent to see whether this fits. If it does, the identity relation is established and only once this is done the broader context is taken into consideration. If the established identity relation contradicts the information already present in the discourse model, it is abandoned and the process will try to establish another relation.

What makes an approach to utterance interpretation using frames interesting is the fact that it allows to keep the semantics of the expressions used in an utterance minimal, while still allowing particular IMAs to figure in the interpreted utterance. In addition, introducing such variables for potential discourse referents does not mean that they have to get specified in the course of utterance or further discourse interpretation; it is quite possible that such variables will remain unspecified and thus remain in the background. In fact, considering that particular IMAs seem to get interpreted even out of a particular context, one might argue that the information retrieved from evoked conceptual frames actually constitutes the minimal background against which an utterance is interpreted.