Is there any Rescue from ‘Pragmantics’?

Johannes Dölling (Leipzig)

"pragmantics, a horrid cocktail of semantics and pragmatics" (Levinson 2000)

Overview

- Deferred interpretation: a challenge to the Gricean picture
- Semantic coercion and its problems
- The ‘pragmantics’ response
- Inflected semantic form and pragmatic parameter fixation
- The semantics/pragmatics distinction: general conclusions

Deferred interpretation: a challenge to the Gricean picture

- Transfers of Meaning
  1. #The ham sandwich left without paying.
     \[\text{shift}\]
     'The person who ordered one (or more) ham sandwich(s) left without paying.'
  2. #I am parked out back.
     \[\text{shift}\]
     'I am a person whose car(s) is/are parked out back'
  - Aspect shift (cf. Jackendoff 1997)
  3. #The light \textit{flashed} until dawn.
     \[\text{shift}\]
     'The light \textit{repeatedly flashed} until dawn.'

- The Gricean division of labor between semantics and pragmatics

Seminarkolloquium, 14.04.2005

Semantics

- deals with the context-independent meaning of words and sentences as determined by the rules of language.

Pragmatics

- deals with what users of the language mean by their utterance of words and sentences in particular contexts.

Interpretation of an utterance as a two-step procedure:

- Semantic composition
- Indexical fixing

GRICEAN PRAGMATICS

‘what is said’

- propositional, i.e. truth-conditional content PC

‘what is conveyed’

Priority of literal meaning

- what is said
  - the literal meaning
    - of (1):
      - 'The ham sandwich left without paying.'

- what is conveyed
  - the non-literal meaning
    - of (1):
      - 'The man who ordered a ham sandwich left without paying.'

Problem

- It is extremely unlikely that inferential schemas of pragmatics generate deferred interpretations in such a destructive, uneconomical manner.

Semantic coercion and its problems

Seminarkolloquium, 14.04.2005
Basic assumption
Deferred interpretations are motivated by the attempt to resolve a semantic mismatch or, more specifically, a conflict between the semantic sorts (or types) of constituents of an utterance.

Type (sort) coercion as part of semantic composition
Type (sort) coercion is a semantic operation that converts an argument to the type (sort) which is expected by a function, where it would otherwise result in a type (sort) error.

Underspecified sort coercion (Dölling 1995, cf. also de Swart 1998)

- Goal
Proposing an approach that allows extensively semantic coercion and, at the same time, maintains semantic compositionality.

- Basic idea
Semantics disposes of a small set of coercion templates whose concrete content is underspecified in some respect and, for this reason, independent of any world and discourse knowledge.

- Separation of sort coercion and meaning shift
(i) Semantics: To buffer a semantic conflict, a coercion template is hypothetically applied, introducing a free variable into the semantic composition.

(ii) Pragmatics: To justify the hypothetic coercion and, thus, to realize the meaning shift, an admissible instantiation of the free variable is inferred on the basis of world knowledge.

Lexically governed type coercion (Pustejovsky 1995)

- Basic idea
Type coercion uses specific operators that are licensed by pieces of general world knowledge being part of the semantic lexical entries of expressions involved.

- Problems
1. Including general world knowledge into lexical entries expands the lexicon too much.
2. Contextually determined choices between several lexically licensed options of coercion are in conflict with strong semantic compositionality.
3. Reducing coercion to a small set of lexically licensed operators constrains the range of possible meaning shifts too much.
Problem 1: As meaning can be shifted in more than one direction, it has to be decided with recourse to world or discourse knowledge which of the expressions should be subject to coercion.

(1) The ham sandwich left without paying.  
   ‘The [shift (a, ham sandwich)] left without paying.’ (topic: a person)

(2) I am parked out back.  
   ‘I [shift (be parked out back)].’ (topic: a person)

(3) Yeats is still widely read.  
   (a) Yeats is still widely read (though he has been dead for more than 50 years).  
      ‘Yeats, [shift (be still widely read)] ... he, ...’ (topic: Yeats)
   (b) Yeats is still widely read (even though most of it is out of print).  
      ‘(shift (be Yeats)), is still widely read ... it, ...’ (topic: his work)

Problem 2: Meaning shifts need not be triggered by a sortal mismatch between expressions but may also result from a conflict with stereotypical knowledge of experience.

(7) (a) Sue jogged for ten minutes.  
   duration of the process
   (b) Sue jogged for ten years.  
       duration of the habitual state

(8) (a) Mary escaped on the island.  
   location of the event
   (b) Mary escaped on the bicycle.  
       location of the agent

Problem 3: Expressions that are compatible with conceptual and stereotypical knowledge in a literal reading may nevertheless undergo a meaning shift motivated by situational or discourse knowledge.

(9) Hemingway was on the left.  
   (a) ‘Hemingway was on the left.’ (topic: Hemingway)
   (b) ‘shift (a, Hemingway) was on the left.’ (topic: his work, picture or ...)

(10) Paul broke five cups.  
    (a) ‘Paul broke five cups.’ (collective reading: ‘at once’)
    (b) ‘Paul shift (v, break) five cups.’ (distributive reading: ‘successively’)

The pragmatic intrusion

The Gricean circle  
Die Pragmatik leistet einen Beitrag zum Gesagten ("what is said")

Levinson:
The response by Kaplan

- 3-Ebenen-Semantik
  (‘Rettung’ der Montague-Semantik: ‘Formale Pragmatik’)

  \[
  \begin{align*}
  \text{character} &= \text{Ausdrucksbedeutung} \quad \text{(Bierwisch: \textit{sem, SF})} \\
  \text{content} &= \text{Äußerungsbedeutung} \quad \text{(Bierwisch: \textit{m, CS})}
  \end{align*}
  \]

  Funktionen von Kontexten in \textit{contents}

  Funktionen von Indices in \textit{extensions}

  Domänen der Geltung:
  1. Indexikalische Ausdrücke
  2. Metonymie, andere Bedeutungsvariationen

  \text{(Vgl. Sag 1981)}

The ‘pragmantics’ response

- Basic assumption
  Deferred interpretations show that one cannot “do semantic composition first and pragmatics later”.

- Enriched semantic composition (Jackendoff 1997)
  - Meaning shift as a general ‘repair’ mechanism
    Meaning shifts involve an \textit{interpolation of concrete conceptual material} that is not expressed lexically, but that must be present either
    (i) in order to ensure semantic well-formedness or
    (ii) in order to \textit{satisfy the pragmatics} of the discourse or extralinguistic context.
  - Meaning shift as an argument against strong semantic compositionality
    Syntactically transparent semantic compositions should be viewed \textit{merely as a default} in a wider range of options called \textit{enriched composition}.

- Cognitive Grammar (Lakoff, Langacker, Taylor et al.)
  The standard principle of semantic compositionality \textit{has to be cancelled}.

- General conclusion
  There is no any fundamental distinction between semantics and pragmatics!

Inflected semantic form and pragmatic parameter fixation

- Starting point
  The strategy of underspecified sort coercion (Dölling 1995) fails since it precludes all meaning shifts that are not based on semantic (conceptual) mismatches and, in addition, ignores the problem of determining the direction of meaning shift.

- Goal
  Proposing a more general approach that removes the shortcomings while maintaining the \textit{modularity of semantics and pragmatics}.

  The result of compositional semantic construction for an utterance is a meaning structure called \textit{semantic form SF} which
  (i) is \textit{radically underspecified} and, for this reason,
  (ii) need extensive processes of \textit{enrichment by pragmatic inference} for reaching the full-specified meaning structure of the utterance.

- Basic idea
  Introducing gaps into semantic construction where meaning shifts might occur and later filling them with shift operators if necessary, and with zero otherwise

(5) #A bottle froze.

‘gapping’
\[\exists x \left[ \ldots \text{[BOTTLE]}(x) \& \ldots \text{[FREEZE]}(x) \right] \]

filling the gaps
\[\exists x \left[ \emptyset \text{[BOTTLE]}(x) \& \emptyset \text{[FREEZE]}(x) \right] \]

(\(A\) bottle froze.

(11) #Chris played the sonata for some time.

SF I: \(\exists x \left[ \theta(\text{chris}, x) \& \text{[FREEZE]}(x) \& \text{[PLAY]}(x) \right] \)

(a) Progressive interpretation
‘Chris was playing the sonata for some time.’

(b) Habitual interpretation
‘Chris was for some time in the habit of playing the sonata.’

(c) Iterative interpretation
‘Chris repeatedly played the sonata for some time.’
The semantics/pragmatics distinction: general conclusions

- The phenomenon of deferred, non-literal interpretation of utterances forces to revise the received view of the relations between semantics and pragmatics.

- Proposals to explain deferred interpretations by semantic coercion fail since they constrain the range of possible meaning shifts to much and, in addition, overlook important effects by pragmatics.

- "Pragmantics" making semantic composition to a fundamental pragmatic process can be avoided if the proposition explicitly expressed by an utterance is no longer identified with the output of semantics.

- It has to be strictly distinguished between the radically underspecified semantic form of an utterance and the elaboration of its propositional content by pragmatic enrichment (cf. Carston 1999, 2004, Recanati 2004, but also Levinson 2000).

- From this point of view, literal meaning is not more basic than non-literal meaning but results likewise from the pragmatic instantiation of semantic form, although by default.

References

Pulman, St. (1997): Aspectual Shift as Type coercion. Transactions of the Philological Society 95, 279-317.