

ISSUES IN PRAGMATICS (PLIN 3001) 2006-07

LEXICAL PRAGMATICS

7. Word meaning and the semantics/pragmatics distinction: (b) Lexical broadening

1. Introduction

Last week, we started looking at the role of concepts in communication. I suggested that if we take seriously the inferential approach to communication, we should not expect the concept **encoded** by a word to be invariably identical to the concept **expressed** by use of that word on a given occasion. The encoded concept merely acts as a starting point for inferential comprehension, and language use does not give direct insight into meaning. The examples we looked at last week were cases of **lexical narrowing**, where a word is used to pick out only a subpart of the linguistically-specified denotation (e.g. *drink* is used to pick out not the act of drinking liquid but the act of drinking alcohol, or drinking a significant amount of alcohol). I argued that considerations of relevance play a crucial role in determining the degree and direction of narrowing. When the encoded meaning is too general to satisfy the hearer's expectation of relevance, he can narrow it, thus increasing cognitive effects, until the utterance is relevant in the expected way. So by saying 'I have a temperature', a speaker can communicate that she has a temperature high enough to be worth mentioning in the circumstances. The comprehension process would involve constructing an ad hoc concept TEMPERATURE*, modelled on the concept TEMPERATURE, but with a narrower denotation and greater cognitive effects.

This week, I want to look at some examples of **lexical broadening**, where a word is used to apply to objects, events or actions that strictly speaking fall outside its linguistically-specified denotation. I will argue that broadening, like narrowing, is triggered by the search for relevance, and involves the construction of **ad hoc concepts** based on information made accessible by the encyclopaedic entry of the encoded concept. Sometimes, the particular subset of encyclopaedic assumptions that lead to an interpretation that is relevant in the expected way result in a **broadening** rather than a **narrowing** of the linguistically specified denotation (e.g. *bird*, which gives access to the contextual assumption that birds fly, may be used to denote a set of flying things that includes, but goes beyond, the set of birds). I will try to show that **approximation**, **category extension**, **hyperbole** and **metaphor** can all be satisfactorily analysed as varieties of broadening (see Carston 2002, Wilson & Sperber 2002, Wilson 2003 for discussion).

2. Existing accounts of broadening

In this section, we'll look at three existing accounts of different types of broadening: I'll argue that the first two are unsatisfactory, but the third (based on Barsalou's notion of ad hoc concepts) fits well with the approach to narrowing we took last week, and can be generalised to deal with the full range of varieties of broadening listed in Lecture 1. The first is David Lewis's account of approximation; the second is Grice's account of metaphor and hyperbole, and the third is Glucksberg's account of metaphor and category extension.

Approximation, as we saw in Lecture 1, is a **minimal** type of broadening of the linguistically-specified denotation, to include what Lasersohn (1999) calls a 'penumbra' of cases that lie just outside the encoded meaning. Clear cases include approximations based on round numbers, as in (1a), geometric terms, as in (1b), and negatively-defined terms, as in (1c):

(1a) This coat cost *1,000* dollars. ('about 1,000 dollars')

(1b) The stones form a *circle, an oval, a pyramid*. ('approximately a circle')

(1c) This injection will be *painless*. ('nearly painless')

Broadening, like narrowing, is a flexible, context-dependent process. The same word can be narrowed to different degrees in different contexts, as in (2a-c):

(2a) This ironing board is *flat*.

(2b) My garden is *flat*.

(2c) My neighbourhood is *flat*.

(2d) My country is *flat*.

(2e) The Earth is *flat*.

David Lewis (1979/3) analyses approximation as involving variation in **contextually-determined standards of precision**:

'The standards of precision in force are different from one conversation to another, and may change in the course of a single conversation. Austin's 'France is hexagonal' is a good example of a sentence that is true enough for many contexts but not true enough for many others.' (Lewis 1983)

In certain situations (e.g. filling out a tax return) we are expected to speak quite precisely, but in others (e.g. chatting to a friend) such precision is not expected. In Lewis's terms, the 'standards of precision' vary, so that an utterance that is strictly speaking false, e.g. (1)-(2), may be accepted by the hearer as 'true enough'. (For a more fully developed account of approximation along these lines, see Lasersohn 1999.)

From a pragmatic point of view, there are three main problems with Lewis's rather brief account. In the first place, as noted above, approximation is very flexible and context-dependent. An adequate account of approximation should shed some light on what triggers approximation, what direction it takes, and when it stops. In Lewis's terms, it should explain what makes a particular approximation count as 'true enough'. But consider (3):

(3) The train will leave at 7.21 and arrive at 8.42.

Most hearers (at least in England) would accept (3) as 'true enough' if the train leaves a few minutes late, but not if it leaves a few minutes early. By contrast, they would accept (3) as 'true enough' if the train arrives a few minutes late **or** a few minutes early. How is this to be explained? Clearly, an adequate explanation of what counts as 'true enough' in particular cases must appeal to quite detailed encyclopaedic knowledge of the behaviour of trains, and about what would be relevant to particular hearers on particular occasions. The appeal to 'contextually determined standards of precision' sheds no light on this, and is really acting as no more than a placeholder for a full pragmatic account designed to show exactly how different expressions would be narrowed on different occasions.

A second problem with Lewis's analysis is that it does not generalise to category extension, hyperbole or metaphor. Lewis treats metaphor and hyperbole quite differently from approximation, endorsing Aristotle's view of figurative language as encoding both a literal and a **figurative** meaning. It follows that, for Lewis, there must be a clear cut-off point between approximation (governed by contextually-determined standards of precision) and hyperbole and metaphor (ambiguous between literal and figurative meanings). This raises a third problem for Lewis's account, because, as noted in Lecture 1, there is no clear cut-off point between literal use, approximation, hyperbole and metaphor. Consider (4):

(4) That book *puts me to sleep*.

This can be interpreted as (a) literally true ('The book actually puts me to sleep'), (b) an approximation ('The book almost puts me to sleep'), (c) a hyperbole ('The book puts me in a state not too far removed from sleep') and (d) a metaphor ('The book puts me in a state resembling sleep'). Most people without theoretical axes to grind would be hard put to say where literalness shades into approximation, approximation shades into hyperbole and hyperbole shades into metaphor. We would like an account of approximation that allows for this possibility of a

gradient of possible interpretations between strictly literal and fully figurative. Lewis's does not.

Moving on to **metaphor** and **hyperbole**, I suggested in Lecture 1 that they might be seen as more **radical** broadenings of the linguistically-specified denotation, to include items which fall further outside the strict linguistic meaning. Thus, (5), understood as an approximation, would convey that the water was **almost** boiling, while understood as a hyperbole, it would convey merely that the water was hotter than expected, or uncomfortably hot. Similarly, (6), understood as a metaphor, would convey that Mary belongs to a broader category which shares **some** of the encyclopaedic properties of violets, but not **most**, or **all**:

- (5) This water is *boiling*. (hyperbole: 'hotter than expected/uncomfortably hot')
 (6) Mary is *a violet*. (metaphor: 'shy, retiring, delicate')

As is well known, Grice (1989) treats metaphor and hyperbole as blatant violations of a maxim of truthfulness, with resulting **implicature**. The hearer is supposed to assume that a speaker who blatantly violates the maxim of truthfulness intends to implicate a related true proposition. In the case of a hyperbole such as (5), it would be a weaker proposition such as (7), and in the case of a metaphor such as (6), it would be a related comparison such as (8):

- (7) This water is very hot.
 (8) Mary resembles a violet in some respects.

In the past 10 or 15 years, it has been increasingly recognised that this Gricean approach to figurative language runs into serious problems. In the first place, it wrongly predicts that the hearer, expecting literal truthfulness (as required by the maxim of truthfulness) tries the literal interpretation first, and considers a metaphorical interpretation only if the literal interpretation is blatantly false. (For arguments against pragmatic frameworks with a maxim of truthfulness, with analyses of several varieties of broadening, see Wilson & Sperber 2002.) But experimental evidence has shown that metaphorical interpretations take no more time to produce than literal interpretations, and this is hard to reconcile with Grice's account (see Gibbs 1994; Glucksberg 2001). Introspective evidence points in the same direction: for example, (4) above might be understood as a metaphor without it ever occurring to the hearer to wonder if the book **literally** put the speaker to sleep.

A second problem with Grice's account of hyperbole and metaphor is that it does not generalise to approximations, which, as we've seen, are considered 'true enough', rather than blatantly false. Yet, as we've also seen, there is no clear cut-off point where (5) ('This water is

boiling) stops being ‘true enough’ and starts being blatantly false. Finally, there are well-known descriptive problems with Grice’s approach to figurative language. (For discussion, see Wilson & Sperber 2002, section 2). For example, negative metaphors such as (9) are **true** rather than blatantly false, and metaphorical imperatives such as (11) are not even candidates for being true or false:

(9) Mary is no angel.

(10) Be an angel!

It therefore seems at least worth looking for an alternative, more descriptively adequate account.

As noted above, experimental studies of metaphor by Gibbs and Glucksberg confirm the inadequacy of models of comprehension based on the standard Gricean approach by showing that a literal interpretation does not always have to be considered and rejected before moving to a metaphorical interpretation. Glucksberg (1999, 2001) proposes instead that metaphor should be analysed as a variety of category extension, involving the creation of an ad hoc concept along the lines proposed by Barsalou (who was looking only at cases of narrowing). Category extension works in the following way: a salient, or prototypical, category member (e.g. *Hoover* in the category of vacuum cleaners, and *Kleenex* in the category of disposable tissues) may be used to represent a broader category (VACUUM CLEANER, DISPOSABLE TISSUE) of which it is a salient member. This treatment may be extended to proper names, as in (11a-b), and common nouns, as in (11c):

(11a) Federer is the next *Sampras*. [GIFTED, DOMINANT TENNIS PLAYER]

(11b) Iraq is this generation’s *Vietnam*. [NATION-DIVIDING WAR]

(11c) Brown is the new *black*. [BASIC FASHION COLOUR]

Thus, *Sampras* may be used to represent the broader category of GIFTED, DOMINANT TENNIS PLAYERS, of which he is a salient member, *Vietnam* may be used to represent the broader category of CONTROVERSIAL, LEGALLY QUESTIONABLE WARS, of which it is a salient member, and so on. From there, it is a short step to seeing the metaphorical *violet* in (6) as representing the broader category of DELICATE, FLAMBOYANT, EASILY-OVERLOOKED things, and so on for other examples. Glucksberg comments:

Good metaphors ... are acts of classification that attribute ... an interrelated set of properties to their topics. It follows that metaphoric comparisons acquire their metaphoricity by behaving as if they were class-inclusion assertions. (Glucksberg 2001:46)

On this approach, metaphor, like narrowing, involves the construction of an ad hoc concept representing a broader category than the encoded one, and broadening and narrowing may be seen as complementary processes, the one restricting and the other extending the linguistically-specified denotation.

Glucksberg, like Barsalou, takes for granted that the hearer will recognise when an ad hoc concept is needed, and does not offer a detailed pragmatic account of what triggers broadening, what direction it takes, and when it stops. In the next section, I'll suggest an account (along lines proposed by Carston 2002, Wilson & Sperber 2002, Wilson 2003) which claims that broadening, like narrowing, is triggered by the search for relevance, and follows a path of least effort in the mutual adjustment of context, explicit content and cognitive effects in an attempt to satisfy the hearer's expectations of relevance.

3. A relevance-theoretic account of broadening

Let's start with the category extension in (11a), which was used by many tennis commentators during Wimbledon 2003:

(11a) Federer is the next *Sampras*.

For many hearers, the encoded concept SAMPRAS would give access to a wide array of encyclopaedic assumptions about Sampras, some of which, on a **spreading activation** account of memory, will receive additional activation from the mention of Federer and from the discourse context, including the fact that the utterance was produced during Wimbledon 2003. Although these highly activated assumptions will differ from hearer to hearer, they are likely to include the information that Sampras is a formidably gifted natural player of a certain type, that he has won Wimbledon many times and played a leading role in the tournament over many years, and so on. A hearer in this situation will have a certain expectation of relevance, based on past experience of the level and type of cognitive effects that tennis commentators typically achieve during Wimbledon fortnight. According to the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, he should follow a path of least effort in looking for the expected level and type of cognitive effects, adding the most highly activated assumptions from his encyclopaedic entry for SAMPRAS to the context, and mutually adjusting explicit content, context and cognitive effects until he has enough effects to satisfy his expectation of relevance. The result will be an interpretation in which *Sampras* expresses an ad hoc concept SAMPRAS* denoting a category of tennis players whose members include not only Sampras but other players with the encyclopaedic attributes

necessary for achieving these cognitive effects. On this interpretation, the speaker of (11a) will be understood as claiming that Federer falls into this ad hoc category and is therefore likely to dominate Wimbledon for many years, etc.

Here is how this account might apply to the interpretation of *put to sleep* in (4) (repeated below), which we've seen can be understood as literal, an approximation, a hyperbole or a metaphor:

(4) That book puts me to sleep.

On the Gricean approach, (4) should have three distinct interpretations: as a literal assertion, a hyperbole or a metaphor (Grice offers no account of approximation; see Wilson & Sperber 2002, section 3 for discussion). Of these, the hearer should test the literal interpretation first, and consider a figurative interpretation only if the literal interpretation is blatantly false. Yet as noted above, there is both experimental and introspective evidence against this approach when construed as a model of comprehension.

On the relevance-theoretic account sketched above, there is no presumption that the literal meaning will be tested first. The encoded concept PUT TO SLEEP is merely a starting point for inferential comprehension, giving access to an ordered array of encyclopaedic assumptions from which the hearer is expected to choose in adjusting context, content and expected cognitive effects. Let's suppose that Mary has produced (4) in response to Peter's question 'What do you think of Martin's latest book?' Peter will therefore be expecting her utterance to achieve relevance by answering his question: that is, by offering an evaluation of the book. Given this expectation, her utterance is likely to activate the contextual assumption that a book which puts one to sleep is extremely boring and unengaging. By following a path of least effort in the mutual adjustment of context, content and cognitive effects, he can then arrive at a range of interpretations based on successively broader ad hoc concepts PUT TO SLEEP*, PUT TO SLEEP** and PUT TO SLEEP***, denoting successively broader categories, with successively fewer implications in common with those that would be carried by the literal concept PUT TO SLEEP. The effect of an **approximation** will be achieved if the hearer arrives at the concept PUT TO SLEEP*, which shares **most** of its encyclopaedic entry, and hence **most** of its implications, with the literal concept PUT TO SLEEP. The effect of **hyperbole** will be achieved if he arrives at the concept PUT TO SLEEP**, which shares **much** of its encyclopaedic entry, and hence **many** of its implications, with the literal concept PUT TO SLEEP; and the effect of **metaphor** will be achieved by arriving at the concept PUT TO SLEEP***, which shares

some of its encyclopaedic entry, and hence **some** of its implications, with the literal concept PUT TO SLEEP. (The degrees of distance from the literal concept will lead, for example, to successively weaker assumptions about the degree of boredom and disengagement created by reading the book.) Only if one of these broader interpretations fails to satisfy his expectations of relevance would Peter be justified in moving towards a more literal interpretation. Thus, the order in which interpretations are tested will typically be just the reverse of the one predicted by Grice: the hearer starts by adding the most highly activated assumptions to the context, creating a broad ad hoc category with a few shared implications, and continues in the direction of increasing literalness until he has enough cognitive effects to satisfy his expectation of relevance; at which point, he stops. This fits much better with what is known about the processing of literal and metaphorical utterances (see Glucksberg and Gibbs for discussion) than the standard Gricean account.

4. Further evidence for the relevance-theoretic approach

In the paper 'Loose talk' (1985/6) (one of the earliest publications proposing to treat metaphor and hyperbole as varieties of broadening), Dan Sperber and Deirdre suggested that the so-called 'Sorites' paradoxes might provide further evidence for an approach along these lines. Let's take the **baldness paradox** as an illustration. You get into this paradox by agreeing, first, that someone with no hair is bald; next, that if someone with no hair is bald then someone with one hair is bald; and then, via the general principle that if someone with n hairs is bald then someone with $n + 1$ hairs is bald, to the conclusion that someone with a full head of hair is bald – which is clearly absurd:

(12a) A man with no hair is bald.

(12b) A man with one hair is bald.

(12c) If a man with n hairs is bald, a man with $n+1$ hairs is bald

(12d) Hence, a man with a full head of hair is bald.

How can we avoid this paradox? The ad hoc concept account sketched above suggests a possible way. (Some critics have felt that while it might work for the baldness paradox, it doesn't necessarily work for other Sorites paradoxes – I can give you references if you're interested.)

Suppose the ad hoc concept approach is correct, and that *bald* (like *painless* in (1c) above) is a negatively-defined term which strictly speaking means WITHOUT HAIR. Then *bald*, like *painless*, may be used to express this literal meaning in (12a), but may also be loosely used to convey successively broader approximations, BALD*, BALD**, BALD***, as in (12b)-(12d)

(which, like (1c), are strictly speaking false). As we saw with *put to sleep* above, the ad hoc concept BALD*, shares **almost all** contextual implications with the concept BALD, and has a broader denotation, including people with no hair or at most a little hair. As we move from (12a) to (12d), the approximations become looser, each sharing fewer implications with the encoded concept, but applying to people with a little more hair. As the distance from the original concept increases and the shared implications diminish, the appropriateness of the term *bald* will itself diminish, to the point where optimal relevance is no longer achieved. This approach combines a strict semantics for *bald* with a pragmatic account of how it can be loosely used. Notice, now, that for the argument in (12) to be valid and the paradox to arise, *bald* must be used in the same sense at every step. On the analysis proposed here, the sense changes from BALD to BALD* to BALD** at each successive step, so the argument is strictly invalid, and the paradox does not arise.

A second type of evidence for an approach based on ad hoc concept construction comes from neologisms such as (13a-c) (Clark & Clark 1979; Clark & Gerrig 1983):

- (13a) The paper boy *porched* the newspaper.
 (13b) He *Houdinied* his way out of the cupboard.
 (13c) She *Learjetted* off to Malibu.

If you know the noun *porch* (which refers to the sheltered space in front of a house) and the names *Houdini* (an escape artist) and *Learjet* (a private jet), and if you have the appropriate background knowledge about newspaper boys in America, Houdini and Learjets, you should have no trouble understanding the verb *porch* as denoting the act of throwing a newspaper onto a porch, the verb *Houdini* as denoting the act of escaping 'magically' from a cupboard, and so on. Clark & Clark (1979) studied a whole range of newly-coined verbs created ad hoc from nouns, and showed that they present no problems of understanding to ordinary hearers. One way of analysing these cases would be to say that the hearer takes the concept linguistically encoded by the noun as a starting point for inferring the concept expressed by use of the verb. The fact that hearers are so good at this suggests a great facility for the construction of ad hoc concepts during on-line comprehension. (Notice that these examples provide further confirmation that ad hoc concepts contribute to the **explicit truth-conditional content** of an utterance, and not just to implicatures: if they didn't, (13a-c) would express no proposition at all.)

Other examples can be created by imagining unusual circumstances in which a familiar word might be loosely used for reasons of optimal relevance. (The technical term for this is 'catachresis'). Suppose you're walking along the road with a large pane of glass, when it starts to

rain. You use the glass to shelter your head. I turn to you and say:

(14) Can I share your *umbrella*?

Here, *umbrella* picks out a broader category than the linguistically-specified one, which includes panes of glass used to protect the carrier from rain. Most hearers would have no difficulty recovering the intended interpretation, which would no doubt be easier to process than the longer and more puzzling 'Can I share your pane of glass?' Again, this suggests a great facility in creating ad hoc concepts on-line for purposes of communication and comprehension.

Catachresis is often contrasted with metaphor and hyperbole in the following way. In catachresis, a familiar word is used in a new sense to plug a gap in the vocabulary, because no existing word applies literally to the object in question. In metaphor and hyperbole, by contrast, a familiar word is used in a new sense, even though there is an existing word which applies literally to the object in question. The fact that an approach based on ad hoc concept construction works as well for catachresis as for metaphor and hyperbole (which may indeed shade into each other) is a further advantage of this approach.

4. Conclusion

The approach to lexical pragmatics outlined in the last two lectures combines a relatively strict distinction between word meaning and word use with a cognitive ability to construct new ad hoc concepts whose deployment in communication is constrained by powerful pragmatic principles. Along these lines, we might justify the claim that lexical meaning is merely the starting point for inferential comprehension, and that the concept **expressed** by use of a word may go well beyond the concept **encoded**. The main advantage of this approach is its flexibility and generality: it uses the same machinery to deal with literal use, narrowing, approximation, metaphor, hyperbole, catachresis and neologism, and also sheds some light on processes of semantic change. Next week, we'll look at one final type of case in which the concept expressed may go beyond the concept encoded: the case of **attributive**, or **deferential**, use.

Homework

1. Come prepared to criticise or defend Lewis's account of approximation. (for critique, see discussion in sections on 'loose use' in Wilson & Sperber 2002).
2. How would *painless* in (a) be understood on the relevance-theoretic account as (i) an approximation, and (ii) a hyperbole? (What contextual assumptions and implications might be involved in each case?)
 - (a) Dentist: This injection will be painless.

Reading

- Carston, R. 2002 *Thoughts and Utterances*, chap 5, sections 5.2 and 5.3
 Wilson, D. 2003 Relevance and lexical pragmatics. (downloadable from my website)

Background references

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