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PRAGMATICS AND THE FLEXIBILITY OF WORD MEANING

Enikő Németh T. & Károly Bibok



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University of Szeged, Hungary



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The aim of this series is to focus upon the relationship between semantic and pragmatic theories for a variety of natural language constructions. The boundary between semantics and pragmatics can be drawn in many various ways and the relative benefits of each have given rise to a vivid theoretical dispute in the literature in the last two decades. As a side-effect, this variety has given rise to a certain amount of confusion and lack of purpose in the extant publications on this topic.

This series will provide a forum where the confusion within existing literature can be removed and the issues raised by different positions can be discussed with a renewed sense of purpose. The editors intend contributions to this series to take further strides towards clarity and cautious consensus.

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The present volume contains an Introduction and 11 papers, all related to a new field of investigation in linguistics which can be labeled lexical pragmatics. Eight contributions to this book (by R. Blutner and T. Solstad, S. A. Cote, T. Fretheim, P. Pelyvás, T. Prčić, R. Rozina, I. Vaskó as well as K. Bibok and E. Németh T.) were originally presented at the 7th International Pragmatics Conference (Budapest, Hungary, July 9–14, 2000) in the panel “Pragmatics and the flexibility of word meaning”. Two other papers (by Y. Maschler and Y. Matsumoto) also presented in the Budapest panel have been published elsewhere. Three authors, namely I. Boguslavsky, A. Kertész and G. Pethő were invited by the editors to contribute to this volume after the book proposal submitted to the Elsevier Publishers had been accepted. It is worth noting that these three latter authors were also present among the audience in the panel in Budapest. All in all, this collection of papers grew out of the above mentioned panel. Thus, we thank, on the one hand, all the members of the panel for accepting our invitation to participate in it and, on the other hand, Ferenc Kiefer (Research Institute for Linguistics, Budapest, Hungary) general discussant as well as the audience whose questions, comments helped to clarify some issues to the panelists.

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Enikő Németh T. and
Károly Bibok

Szeged, June 25, 2001

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INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS THE NEW LINGUISTIC DISCIPLINE OF LEXICAL PRAGMATICS

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1. A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Recently, the investigation of word meaning in utterances has connected lexical semantics and pragmatics, two fields of linguistics which until now were only loosely related, if at all (Blutner, 1998; see also Fischer, 2000). A particular kind of accounts for the division of labor between lexical semantics and pragmatics has been developed in this research area. Determining whether various meanings of a word in various contexts are properly represented lexically or pragmatically is not a simple task. Different researchers adopt different criteria in this respect, which, to some extent, is inevitable, given their different assumptions about the role of the lexicon and the expressive power of the lexical component and pragmatics. But there is no doubt that **lexical semantics has to interact with pragmatics** to explain various word meanings in utterances. Thus, a new linguistic discipline, namely **lexical pragmatics** is emerging.

The present book is a collection of eleven papers. They constitute a unit in the sense that they are all concentrated on one and the same problem: their common main aim is to explore the interaction between lexical semantics and pragmatics. The contributors discuss the meaning flexibility of simple and complex lexemes, functional words, constructions, and even metalinguistic, theoretical terms by means of several – both semantically and pragmatically – relevant explanations. The authors examine phenomena such as productive sense extension, regular polysemy, multifunctionality, implicit arguments and predicates, non-typical anaphoric pronouns, and diachronic change, on the basis of linguistic data from several languages, e.g. English, Norwegian, Russian, and Hungarian, as well as using a great variety of methods and frameworks.

Instead of meaning extension patterns, Bierwisch's (1983, 1996) two-level conceptual semantics has proposed to account for the flexibility of meaning that the different meanings of a word evoked by the context can be derived from an underspecified core meaning. In the theory of generative lexicon (Pustejovsky, 1995), a set of generative operations connects the different levels of lexical representation, providing for the compositional interpretations of words in contexts. Among the frameworks adopted for the treatment of meaning flexibility there are also database of Russian verbs "Lexicographer" (Kustova and Paducheva, 1994), Jackendoff's (1990) conceptual semantics, prototype theory (Kleiber, 1993), the cognitive theory of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), Langacker's (1987) cognitive grammar, Gricean pragmatics (Grice, 1975), and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Although the two types of knowledge, linguistic and general conceptual (commonsense) knowledge, are not separated definitely in several accounts, the idea of underspecified meaning figures not only in two-level conceptual semantics but is also present in the theory of generative lexicon and in relevance theory. Nevertheless, the contributors to this book share at least the opinion that commonsense assumptions about the surrounding world play a crucial role in the process of utterance production and interpretation. The interaction between the two types of knowledge, the pragmatic strengthening of underdetermined meaning, and the dependence on the interlocutors' world-views can be conceived of as part of the realm of pragmatics, including lexical pragmatics. In addition to these, the sociolect patterns of meaning extension, which encode norms of different subcultures, are also considered by one of the papers. Furthermore, some particular pragmatic and discourse approaches are taken into account in the treatment of linguistic phenomena investigated in the contributions to this volume. A Gricean framework understood in a bidirectional optimality framework which integrates production and comprehension optimization handles the contextual meaning through pragmatic strengthening based on conversational implicatures. The inferable entities of another type are described in a discourse model. Finally, in accordance with relevance theory, some contributors rely on (i) the distinction between conceptual and procedural information, (ii) the possibilities of context extension, and (iii) a concept of an addressee who uses his/her ability to draw inferences about the speaker's communicative intention not only in the computation of implicatures intended by the speaker but also for recovering the explicitly communicated part of the utterance.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

As emphasized above, all contributions in the present volume deal with topics which can be situated in the lexical semantics/pragmatics interface. To provide some more details in this section, we try to give a brief synopsis of each study of this volume following the order in which they appear in the volume.

Reinhard Blutner and Torgrim Solstad present two case studies in lexical pragmatics. Lexical pragmatics combines the idea of (radical) semantic underspecification in the lexicon with a theory of pragmatic strengthening (based on conversational implicatures). In the core of this approach is a precise treatment of Atlas and Levinson's (1981) Q- and I-principles and the formalization of the balance between informativeness and efficiency in natural language processing (Horn's (1984) division of pragmatic labor). To implement the above mechanisms, Blutner and Solstad propose a bidirectional version of optimality theory which aims to integrate expressive and interpretive optimization. The theory is applied (i) to give a new analysis of the phenomenon of negative strengthening and (ii) to resolve some puzzles of dimensional specification of spatial objects. Considering the basic approach of lexical pragmatics that the idea of lexical underspecification has to be combined with a theory of pragmatic strengthening, Blutner and Solstad point out that situated meanings of many words and simple phrases are combinations of their lexical meanings proper and some superimposed conversational implicatures. Formulating pragmatic strengthening in terms of the proposed bidirectional optimality theory formalizes Grice's theory of conversational implicatures. In the authors' opinion, the main advantage of such a theory is that it puts in concrete terms what requisites are for explaining the particular properties of negative strengthening, dimensional designation and other related phenomena.

Igor Boguslavsky concentrates on some unusual phenomena related to the behavior of *even*, mostly in Russian. He presents data concerning both the existential and the scalar implicatures, widely used to describe the meaning of *even* and other focus particles that traditional approaches fail to explain adequately. Boguslavsky argues that in the modeling of human understanding processes, one has to pay utmost attention to the interplay between the different sources of semantic knowledge. In the present paper he introduces two types of interpretation of *even* utterances – *diminuendo* and *crescendo* types – that come into conflict with the scalar implicature generally acknowledged in the characterization of *even* given by traditional lexical semantics frameworks. It has been demonstrated that utterances of these two types have the same linguistic structure and can be served by the same semantic definition of *even*. The difference in their interpretation is accounted for by different strategies applied by the addressee. One of the strategies is used by default and is responsible for the generation of the scalar implicature. The second one – the “best-alternative-excluded” strategy – is applied in the *crescendo* context. Boguslavsky concludes that, on the one hand, the scalar implicature has to be downgraded from the rank of a conventional implicature to a much lower rank of a conversational implicature that is calculated in the context on the basis of the literal meaning, knowledge of the context of utterance, and background (or encyclopedic) knowledge. On the other hand, scalar implicatures are obviously language-specific in the sense that various languages apply them in different degrees, and they belong exactly to the intersection of linguistic semantics and pragmatics.

Sharon A. Cote discusses a corpus study of a variety of discourse “triggers” in English that inferentially increase the activation status of certain entities not yet directly introduced into the discourse context. While one examines the subsequent overt introduction of these inferable entities into discourse, it becomes clear that some triggers do not provide enough information for a hearer to disambiguate the reference of an inferable entity. This seemingly unusual observation about inferable entities is then shown to be similar to observations made in previous work on null subjects and implicit objects, as well as to certain anecdotal observations about event reference. In her paper, Cote therefore argues that discourse participants determine the reference of a referring expression (null or overt) not by fundamentally requiring the identification of a unique co-referent but rather by relying on an “interpretability” constraint. While the interpretability constraint can be met with a linguistic context that provides a unique co-referent, it can be met in other ways as well. More generally, Cote argues that an interpretability constraint on various types of discourse entity inferences, including some inferable entities, correctly represents the real inferential expectation that speakers attempt to fulfill for hearers. She claims that the other supposedly absolute constraints are actually common means for adhering to the interpretability constraint, but certainly not the only means. This seemingly small change in perspective can have significant impacts on the understanding of anaphoric references and of the structuring of local discourse.

Thorstein Fretheim accounts for the polyfunctionality of some English and Norwegian lexical entries of the ‘function word’ type, namely the English markers *after all* and *at least* as well as two Norwegian markers (*allikevel* and *med en gang / med det samme*). These function words serve as blueprints designed to engage the hearer in a specific kind of inferential activity. Fretheim assigns sparse monosemous linguistic meanings to these words and invokes the relevance-theoretic underdeterminacy thesis, which implies that the gap between linguistically encoded lexical meaning and utterance meaning is bridged by context-driven inferences. Fretheim also demonstrates by his analyses that a univocal underdetermined lexical meaning can be established as a semantic input for the pragmatic inferential processes. These inferential procedures operate on linguistically encoded semantic representations to reach the context-dependent meanings in all presented occurrences of all four function words. It is also argued in each case that an alternative account in terms of lexical polysemy is inadequate, as that would be an attempt to formulate in terms of grammar what is really the result of extensive inferential processing aided by (i) the procedural, as opposed to conceptual, lexical meaning of the function words examined, (ii) the procedural meaning which is due to their position in the sentence, and, in some cases, (iii) the procedural meaning of the intonation imposed on the utterance.

András Kertész focuses on the following questions in his article: (i) What is the structure of theoretical terms in generative linguistics? (ii) How does the structure of theoretical terms influence the structure of scientific explanations in generative linguistics? And (iii) to what extent are the answers to the first two questions related to semantic and pragmatic factors?

Kertész's paper exemplifies the applicability of cognitive approaches to the investigation of concept formation in generative linguistics by comparing a holistic and a modular solution to these problems. The holistic approach centers around the hypothesis according to which the theoretical terms of generative linguistics are governed by conceptual metaphors in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). As contrasted with this, the modularity hypothesis along the lines of Bierwisch and Lang's (1989) two-level approach yields the assumption that theoretical terms in generative linguistics rest on operations like conceptual shift, conceptual specification and conceptual selection. Kertész demonstrates that the similarities and the differences between the two solutions to the above three questions boil down to important generalizations concerning the applicability of cognitive approaches in the analysis of scientific concept formation. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that the two approaches should be applied to the same problems, but rather, it is quite probable that the problems to which they can be applied most successfully will not be identical. It is the task of future research to spell out their potential in this respect.

Péter Pelyvás studies some of the factors that led to the emergence of the grounding predication within the framework of Langacker's (1987) holistic cognitive grammar. After a brief examination of how epistemic grounding is treated by Langacker (*ibid.*: 489) and how Langacker's original notion can be extended to include cognitive predicates as well, Pelyvás discusses the general tendencies in the development of the epistemic senses of the modals from their root meanings, analyzing the changes in the image schemas of the modals that mark the development. He pays special attention to changes within immediate scope responsible for the presence vs. absence of relations like permission or obligation, to the reference-point construction, and to subjectification (essentially a special case of change in overall scope), the decisive step in the development of the grounding predication. Pelyvás demonstrates that the root and epistemic schemas developed for the modals can be applied to modal predicates (with deontic meanings, e.g. *permit*, *allow*, *compel*, *oblige*, *forbid*), and to cognitive predicates (with epistemic meanings, e.g. *seem*, *appear*, *think*, *believe*, *assume*, *know* or *possible*, *probable*, *likely*) as well. Development from root to epistemic senses is also possible, e.g. in *expect*. This is regarded as semantic evidence that cognitive predicates are also grounding predications. Pelyvás also outlines a largely unexplored aspect of grounding: apart from marking the degree of the speaker's certainty of a situation (epistemic commitment), some cognitive predicates and grammatical structures can give indication of the correctness of the cognitive model formed by the speaker (on a previous occasion), or by some other subject.

Gergely Pethő tries to provide a general and comprehensive overview of the various positions on the nature of one of the central issues of present day research in word meaning (both in semantics and in pragmatics), namely polysemy. He concentrates especially on those approaches that were actively propagated in the past fifteen years and that discuss the theoretical question of what polysemy itself is in general. His point of departure is Deane's (1987)

dissertation, which also includes a survey of the literature on polysemy up to that date, mostly representatives of the structural semantics strand. Pethő characterizes the latest major positions on the nature of polysemy: that of several holistic cognitive linguists, Nunberg's pragmatic theory of polysemy, different versions of two-level semantics, the knowledge representation approach in computational linguistics, and the generative lexicon theory. Several other less central positions are discussed as well. Recent findings of pragmatic approaches receive special attention and a need for further research in this line is emphasized. With providing this general overview, Pethő fulfills his first main aim. His second and – in some respect – more important goal is to compare the ideas of the presented trends and to show how these independent branches of research can be considered to be parts of a whole. Pethő concludes that despite the apparent incoherence of the different approaches to polysemy, if these are confronted with each other, a surprisingly coherent picture of the phenomena that constitute polysemy may be gained.

In his paper **Tvrtko Prčić** aims at offering an integrated outline of the process of interpretation of morphologically complex lexemes, at (re)assessing the roles of semantics and pragmatics in that process, and at (re)assessing the relationship between semantics and pragmatics in general, and in lexical analysis in particular. Exemplifying the points being discussed with agentive nouns in English, formed from verbal bases by the addition of one of the six competing agentive suffixes, Prčić deals in some detail with the following topics: (i) semantic underspecification, (ii) inferable features contained in morphologically complex lexemes, (iii) the transparency/opacity cline, (iv) the distinction between explicit, implicit and implied information conveyed in/by these lexemes, (v) pragmatic specialization, and (vi) the treatment of compositionality and idiomatization in dictionaries. Prčić concludes, on the one hand, that a decontextualized interpretation of morphologically complex lexemes is based on binary processing and results in an underspecified reading, which leaves the sense insufficiently determined and calls for the missing information to be filled in during the process of pragmatic specialization. On the other hand, the contextualized, pragmatically enriched interpretation of morphologically complex lexemes consists of relevance assignment, morphosemantic analysis and local completion, and results in a reading characterized by all information required for a successful interpretation appropriately supplied.

Raissa Rozina addresses the issues of the difference between regular patterns of one type of semantic derivation, i.e. meaning extension, resulting in standard and slang meanings in Russian. In her paper she uses the term *slang* to refer to the Russian general slang, which is understood as a part of modern Russian slang not restricted to any social or age group. First of all, Rozina concentrates on the patterns of meaning extension of Russian verbs. Relying on the presented analyses of the derivational relations between actions and happenings, she argues that in Russian their relationship is bidirectional. The main direction of derivation in standard language is from actions to happenings, whereas the derivation of actions from happenings usually yields slang meanings. Derived happenings in standard language have the component

of damage in their meanings that infers the component of negative evaluation. Derived actions in slang inherit the component of damage from happenings but do not inherit the negative evaluation. Rozina comes to the conclusions that, on the one hand, all this suggests that meaning extension patterns encode norms of different subcultures. And, on the other hand, general slang reflects and imposes on its users social norms different from those reflected and dictated by using the standard language.

Ildikó Vaskó offers a pragmatic account of the Hungarian adverbial marker *majd* 'later on, some time' with respect to utterances referring to the future. She discusses its communicative role in a relevance theoretical framework. Within this framework, the main question concerning *majd* is whether it encodes conceptual or procedural information. Vaskó demonstrates that this adverb not only signals the postponement of an event in the flow of time (conceptual meaning) but also gives an indication of the speaker's attitude, thus conveying procedural information to be used in utterance interpretation. *Majd* conveys procedural information in utterance interpretation by instructing the hearer to constrain the temporal reference to a time that is later than the time of the utterance. Furthermore, *majd* implies overtly or by inferential process that, for the successful realization of the events that *majd* is associated with, certain conditions have to be fulfilled. These conditions are either explicitly communicated or can be recovered from the context in the course of utterance interpretation.

Károly Bibok and Enikő Németh T. examine in a unified way three types of Hungarian utterances, namely ones with implicit arguments and predicates as well as ones in which the predicates and their arguments are connected by means of a more sophisticated way than simple composition. They demonstrate that the meaning construction of these three types of utterances can only be described by assuming an intensive interaction between the lexicon and the context. On the basis of the analyses provided in their article, the authors conclude that the same three manners of meaning composition can be applied to each type of utterances: (i) considering the conceptual semantic representation of verbs (first type of utterances), nouns (second type of utterances) or both (third type of utterances), (ii) considering the immediate contexts of verbs, nouns or both, and (iii) extending contexts of utterances with information from the preceding discourse, physical environment or encyclopedic knowledge. Bibok and Németh T. argue that these three possibilities of utterance meaning construction as well as their hierarchy are regulated by the cognitive principle of relevance. This rational principle explains the possibility that an argument or a predicate can be lexically unrealized at all: it reaches the same contextual effects as do overt arguments or predicates but with less processing effort. The principle of relevance also explains the possibility of composing a larger unit from predicates and arguments in such a way that the meaning of arguments does influence the activation of the meaning relevant from potential meanings of predicates.