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DISCOURSE, BELIEFS AND INTENTIONS

Semantic Defaults and Propositional Attitude Ascription

K.M. Jaszczolt

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Preface

The theory presented in this book is a voice in the ongoing debate concerning the semantics/pragmatics interface which was set off by the controversy surrounding the cases of the so-called semantic ambiguity back in the early 1970s. The main gist of my approach can be summarized as follows. Conversation relies on default interpretations, the hearer arrives at such a default interpretation without going through the stage of choosing between understandings of a 'semantically ambiguous' sentence. Pragmatic aspects of what is said are already present at the basic semantic level of utterance interpretation. Together with the logical form understood as the output of grammar, they constitute the semantic/propositional representation of the utterance. This is what I call *Default Semantics*. This semantic representation can be overridden, leading to various degrees of departure from the default. The Default Semantics is a reflection of intentionality that characterizes all mental acts. For the purpose of utterance interpretation, I demonstrate how intentionality can be translated into various types of intentions in communication.

This theory sits mid-way between semantic ambiguity and underspecification but falls happily under the 'monoguist' label and 'pragmatic intrusionism' as perceived in dynamic approaches to communication such as Discourse Representation Theory. The approach is spelled out in the example of sentences reporting on propositional attitudes, and in particular reports on beliefs. The main ambiguity I am concerned with is, naturally, the ambiguity exhibited by expressions used by speakers to refer, and the related species of the *de re/de dicto* ambiguity of belief reports. Hence, the book presents the theory of Default Semantics applied to puzzles associated with referring, signals its applicability to natural language negation and, albeit more tentatively, other sentential connectives, as well as instances where the expansion or completion of the sentence is needed before the hearer can arrive at a plausible candidate for what is said. It is hoped that future detailed studies of particular phenomena classified as instances of semantic ambiguity or underspecification will further strengthen its appeal.

The book should be of interest to linguists of postgraduate and advanced undergraduate level, as well as other researchers in linguistics, philosophy of language, social anthropology and cognitive science. It can be read by

anybody interested in the subject who has some elementary knowledge of linguistic semantics, pragmatics, and first-order logic. The balance between review sections and the exposition of the new theory makes it possible to use the book on a more advanced as well as a more basic level. All symbols and abbreviations used are listed below.

Many people contributed at various stages to the crystallization of this work, beginning with my doctoral research conducted between 1988-1992 at the University of Oxford up to the present day. I owe thanks to Kent Bach, Gordon Baker, Gillian Brown, Billy Clark, L. Jonathan Cohen, David Cram, Richard Dammann, Michael Dummett, Vicky Escandell-Vidal, Rom Harré, Roman Kalisz, Ewan Klein, Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, Peter Matthews, Richard Matthews, Stephen Schiffer, Pieter Seuren, Barry Smith (SUNY), Timothy Williamson, and Deirdre Wilson. My particular thanks go to Ken Turner, the co-editor of CRiSPI, for reading the first draft and supplying some useful publications. To Chris Pringle from Elsevier Science I am grateful for his support for the CRiSPI series. Finally, I owe thanks to my husband Charles Berthon for his encouragement.

Some of the ideas included in this book, including Default Semantics, have crystallized over the period of several years of thinking about these issues. The consecutive stages of this research were reported in several journal articles. I owe thanks to several publishing houses for granting permission to adapt relevant ideas and/or relevant sections of the papers for the purpose of this book. In particular, I would like to thank the publishers listed below. The bibliographical details of the relevant papers are given in brackets.

Elsevier Science ('Relevance and Infinity: Implications for Discourse Interpretation'. *Journal of Pragmatics* **25** (1996), 703–722; 'The "Default *De Re*" Principle for the Interpretation of Belief Utterances', *Journal of Pragmatics* **28** (1997), 315–336; 'Default Semantics, Pragmatics, and Intentions', in K. Turner (ed.), 1999, *The Semantics/Pragmatics Interface from Different Points of View. CRiSPI*, vol. 1, 199–232);

Walter de Gruyter ('Discourse about Beliefs', *Theoretical Linguistics* **24** (1998), 1–28);

Julius Groos ('Reports on Beliefs: Default Interpretations and Default Intentions', *Journal of Literary Semantics* **27** (1998), 31–42; 'Referring in Discourse: Referential Intention and the "Taking for Granted" Principle', *Journal of Literary Semantics* **27** (1998), 96–109);

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań ('*De Re/De Dicto*: A Semantics of Belief Sentences', *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* **28** (1993), 39–64).

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The proposed Default Semantics should be seen as a step in the ongoing discussion rather than an attempt to overturn accepted truths. The affinities with the extant proposals of the neo-Gricean theory of implicature, default reasoning, and the neo-Fregean approach to reference should be obvious. To anticipate possible criticism, I should add that Default Semantics is not a complete theory. It is presented here as a new programme, an alternative to semantic ambiguity on the one hand and underspecification on the other. It is a proposal of a theory and an attempt at its application to one area of language. It is hoped that this proposal will meet with some interest and support and will be subsequently tested in its application to various fragments of various natural languages. 'Default intentions' and 'vehicles of thought' must remain partly justified theoretical proposals until humans can look into their neural states and say with certainty what they see there.

Cambridge, January 1999

List of Abbreviations and Symbols

+>	'conversationally implicates'
¬	truth-functional negation
&	truth-functional conjunction
→, ⊃	truth-functional implication
∀	universal quantifier (cf. 'all', 'every')
∃	existential quantifier (cf. 'a', 'some')
1Sg	first person singular number
3Sg	third person singular number
Acc	accusative case
ACI	accusative with infinitive construction (*accusativus cum infinitivo*)
Dem	demonstrative pronoun
DI	Degrees of Intentions principle
DRT	Discourse Representation Theory
DRS	Discourse Representation Structure
fn	footnote
FoL	first-order logic
GCI	generalized conversational implicature
Gen	genitive case
iff	if and only if
ILF	interpreted logical form
Ind	indicative mood
Inf	infinitive
Instr	instrumental case
LF	logical form
Loc	locative case
MoP	mode of presentation
MOR	Modified Occam's Razor
NP	noun phrase
Past	past tense
Past Pple	past participle
PI	Primary Intention principle
POL	Parsimony of Levels principle
Pres	present tense

Refl	reflexive pronoun
Subj	subjunctive mood
SVO	subject-verb-object word order
TCS	Theoretical Contrastive Studies
VP	verb phrase
wff	well-formed formula

Introduction

> "We shall never get rid of the temptation to perceive the universe as a secret script to which we stubbornly try to find the clue." Kołakowski (1988: 118)

Other people's beliefs can be creatures of darkness but only insofar as are not expressed. This book is about ambiguities, beliefs, langu communication and cognition. It deals with the fundamental issue of interpretation of the speaker's utterance expressing a belief and repor on beliefs of other people in the form of *oratio obliqua*. The main objec is to dispel the mystery associated with the process of interpretatio utterances expressing beliefs and belief reports. The sentences ur consideration are of the form of (1) and (2). (1) is an instance of an expres of belief and (2) is a report on a belief.

(1) The man in the brown hat is a spy.

(2) Ralph believes that the man in the brown hat is a spy.

An utterance of (1) potentially exhibits an ambiguity between a refere and nonreferential (attributive) reading of the definite description, and belief report in (2) is potentially ambiguous between reporting on a b concerning a particular person that he is a spy (the *de re* reading) anc the belief about the situation as a whole (the *de dicto* reading). Proper nai although normally not analysed in terms of referential and nonrefere reading, are also used in referring to a known or an unknown indivic and this situation is reflected in belief reports. Like definite descriptions, can also be used in a mistaken act of referring, i.e. referring to somebody does not hold that name.

So far the problem of referential ambiguities has remained lai unresolved. Linguists tend to adopt one of the available stands ranging f the semantic ambiguity to the generality of sense. I develop here I Bach's idea that "an expression's referring function (...) is (...) not pa its semantic contribution to the sentence" (1987a: 58). I demonstrate

referring is the default function guaranteed by the referential intention (embedded in the communicative intention) and is transported to semantics by the intrusion of pragmatic processes before the propositional representation is formed by the hearer. This standpoint has far-reaching implications for the notion of reference, the sense of the term 'referring expression', and the theory of intensional contexts. The category of referring expressions has been a matter of controversy at least since Frege and Russell brought it to the fore. Definite descriptions, for instance, are sometimes classified together with quantifiers (*some*, *few*, *all*, . . .) and sometimes with referring expressions (proper names and pronouns). I follow Bach (1987a) in classifying them as referring expressions, for reasons to be spelled out shortly. On the topic of referring, it is argued here that it is a pragmatic phenomenon and it helps establish the semantic representation of a sentence by means of the intrusion of pragmatic processes. This intrusion is guaranteed by a very important feature of communication, namely its intentionality. Intentions help establish *one* propositional form and enable an unambiguous semantics. By semantics I mean here a semantic theory applicable to the particular speaker – an idea based on the following proposal from Larson and Segal (1995: 187):

> ". . . an important aspect of deciding when a semantic theory applies to a given speaker will lie in deciding whether an axiom may truly be associated with a concept in the speaker's mind (. . .) and when it may not."

This choice between axioms is in fact performed instantaneously by the hearer by means of intention recognition: the default interpretation guaranteed by intentionality is always tried first. In other words, it is presumed.

Differences in referring which are exemplified by the readings of (1) and (2) give rise to puzzles that are ample in the philosophical literature. These differences give grounds to the view that belief expressions and reports on beliefs are referentially ambiguous, the first as extensional contexts where the expression used to refer can *either* refer to an individual *or* name whoever or whatever holds the name, and the other as intensional contexts where the substitution of coreferential expressions may produce a sentence with a different truth value. The referential ambiguity in (1) is well acknowledged in the case of definite descriptions but also seems to occur with proper names, no matter how directly referential we try to make them for semantic analyses. In addition, both can be used correctly or incorrectly, in the latter case engendering referential mistakes. Now, the semantic/pragmatic perspective of discourse representation as opposed to a semantics of isolated sentences allows one to use information from intentions in communication (Grice 1969;

Strawson 1964a; Récanati 1993; Burkhardt, ed. 1990; Bach 1987a, b, 1994a, b), default reasoning (Bach 1984; Lascarides and Oberlander 1993; Levinson 1995) and assumption recovery performed by the hearer (Sperber and Wilson 1986a; Jaszczolt 1996a) in establishing the semantic representation of these problematic constructions. I propose and defend the idea of default interpretations of belief reports and expressions of belief. Potential semantic ambiguities caused by referring terms do not in fact take place and this is due to the interaction of the semantic information (semantic representation of the sentence) and intentions in communication. This interaction produces a default interpretation, which in practice reduces the putative semantic ambiguity to the case of (a) defaults in understanding and (b) overridden defaults producing a justified marked interpretation. Looked at more closely, defaults in the interpretation of belief expressions are ensured by *intending to refer* which I call the *primary referential intention*. Naturally, this primary intention interacts with other intentions in communication, to be spelled out in more detail in what follows (see also Jaszczolt 1997a, 1999).

Default Semantics is governed by three main principles which I call the Parsimony of Levels (POL), Degrees of Intentions (DI), and the Primary Intention (PI):

POL: Levels of senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.

DI: Intentions come in various sizes, i.e. they allow for degrees.

PI: The primary role of intention in communication is to secure the referent of the speaker's utterance.

These principles summarize the idea introduced above, namely that the semantic representation of belief utterances is the product of the logical form (LF) and intentions in their default and non-default values. Some linguists call this level of representation propositional, to distinguish it from the underspecified semantics. In my account, these two levels are conflated and underspecification disappears, but so do ambiguities. If, as I hope to show, this account works, its advantages go without saying. The proposal of the Default Semantics for apparent semantic ambiguities is carefully defended throughout this book and is given formal support in the Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) of Kamp and Reyle (1993) which is a suitably 'intrusionist' model in that it allows for the incorporation of the pragmatic information in the semantic analysis (see Levinson 1988; Jaszczolt 1998a).

The reasons for utilizing DRT are twofold. First, it allows for a formal presentation of the dynamism of utterance interpretation that comes from the flow of conversation and the availability of new contextual information. Second, the idea of the interaction of intentions in communication with the semantic representation is an improvement on DRT itself. It narrows

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down the possibilities of interpretation of the speaker's utterance to one. Defaults in interpretation organize the multiple possibilities of discourse representation in DRT in a systematic way. Instead of talking about alternative discourse representation structures (DRSs), we can now talk about the default DRS and departures from the default.

In the research on referential ambiguities to date, attention has been focused on intra-theoretic concerns of philosophers (here principally the truth-preserving substitutivity of coreferential expressions, i.e. substitutivity *salva veritate*) and model-theoretic solutions in formal linguistics which allow for a varying degree of contribution from pragmatics. The latter is still frequently voiced more as a credo than a sound proposal. A conversational approach that would account for the roles of the speaker and the hearer in meaning construction is badly needed. By this I mean an approach that would reveal and utilize aspects of conversation that have been neglected both in formal semantics and in philosophical discourse on the *de re/de dicto* ambiguity of propositional attitude reports. Intentions in communication are one such aspect, vehicles of thought are another, and conversational data in a contrastive perspective yet another. This book deals with all three. In other words, belief utterances are analysed as sentences, activities and cognitive processes, to allow for a wide understanding of context. In this way, context acquires an epistemological grounding in corresponding carriers of thought: language, mental images, and actions.

It goes without saying that this analysis requires an important assumption of the universality of the semantics and pragmatics of language systems, or what Turner and Jaszczolt (1996: 5) discuss as the Semantic Universals Hypothesis and the Pragmatic Universals Hypothesis: the semantic, as well as pragmatic, systems of the world's natural languages share at least some properties. This is a condition *sine qua non* for any semantic or pragmatic analysis which aspires to cross-linguistic status.

The intrusion of pragmatics, in the form of intentions, into establishing the semantic representation is at the same time a voice in the dispute concerning the semantics/pragmatics interface, and *a fortiori* the dispute concerning the boundary between the two.

***

In more detail, the content of the chapters is as follows. The topic of the first chapter is the state-of-the-art in the semantics-pragmatics debate, followed by a critical assessment of ambiguists and monoguists, culminating in a combination of the strengths of the two camps in the proposal of the Default Semantics in Chapter 2. It is suggested that the POL principle restricts the usefulness of the concept of underspecified sense and leads to its replacement with the interaction of intentions with the LF on the level of

semantic representation. Unambiguous semantics acquires a new meaning, dissociated from underspecification. Chapter 2 spells out the idea of semantic defaults and introduces the types of intentions in communication. It contains a discussion of the PI principle and the tenet that intentions allow for degrees, summarized in the DI principle. These degrees account for various readings for potentially semantically ambiguous utterances. The idea of semantic defaults and principled departures from these defaults is dubbed the Default Semantics. It follows with the application of the Default Semantics to definite descriptions and signals its application to other problematic domains of language. The POL principle is applied to definite descriptions, juxtaposing them with *bona fide* referring expressions and stressing their similarities. The referential intention is said to play an important role in communication and secure the unmarked interpretation of a potentially semantically ambiguous sentence, which is summarized in the PI principle. This intention interacts with other intentions to produce a range of marked interpretations. It is also argued that meaning is established neither by the speaker nor by the hearer but rather in-between, in the process of assumption recovery and assumption construction in what is called here a 'doubly-dynamic' perspective of 'attack and defence'. The proposal of the 'default *de re*' reading of belief reports receives epistemological support in Chapter 3 in the presentation of the association of intentions in communication with the intentionality of mental acts. Intentionality secures default interpretations or 'jumping to conclusions' instead of 'thinking twice' or considering possible paths in which potential semantic ambiguity would, putatively, otherwise lead the interpretation. 'Putatively', because conversation without intentionality is inconceivable. Indeed, relevant mental states without intentionality are hardly conceivable either. Chapter 4 gets to the core of propositional attitude ascription. It contains a critical assessment of the debates surrounding the failure of truth-preserving substitutivity of expressions in the subject position of the embedded sentence of belief reports and combines it with a proposal of the 'default *de re*' reading. This reading is supplemented with the enumeration of possible forms that the departure from the default can take. It is suggested that the substitutions made in conversation differ from the truth-preserving substitutions discussed in the philosophical literature. Some notion of sense is shown to be indispensable for the semantics of attitude reports and it is suggested that it takes the form of modes of presentation (MoPs) that can be of various degrees of detail and can make various degrees of contribution to the semantic representation. Chapter 5 puts together the findings concerning referring properties of expressions and redefines the class of referring expressions by including definite descriptions in their default, unmarked reading. It contains some arguments for the degrees of strength of referring. Default Semantics is juxtaposed with the theories of Referent Accessibility and the Givenness Hierarchy. Chapter 6 takes the lesson from

intentionality further into a discussion of the relation between utterances and beliefs. Language turns out to be one of the vehicles of thought, which allows us to jump to a more practical sphere of conversation and answer the question of 'How do I know what you mean?' without the help of notoriously inapplicable sociolinguistic generalizations. Meaning is carried by linguistic expressions, mental images, and actions and these vehicles of thought interact. As a result of this 'going beyond language', the notion of sense is extended to cater for all these vehicles and Husserl's term noema is adopted for it. The universality and culture-dependence of concepts are also taken on board. Chapter 7 presents the theory of Default Semantics in the framework of DRT, emphasizing the strengths of intrusionism in dynamic semantics, as well as the weaknesses of DRT as a model that assigns equal status to all possible understandings of a potentially semantically ambiguous sentence. I demonstrate how DRT can avoid this weakness when combined with the proposal of the Default Semantics. The degrees of referential intention are translated into the levels of embedding of the discourse referent that stands for an individual in the DRSs. Continuing on a practical note, Chapter 8 looks into the properties of *that*-clauses in a contrastive Polish-English perspective to find independent evidence for the default semantics of sentences reporting beliefs. This independent support is found in the unmarkedness of the Polish construction which corresponds to the *de re* reading of English negative sentences of the type "I don't believe that B φs." Here I make use of the idea of 'structured compositionality' and different sensitivity to the structure of the *that*-clause exhibited by the complementizer *that* in its different understandings. The final chapter sums up the results, points out the common-sense plausibility of the Default Semantics, and offers some guided speculations concerning other domains of apparent semantic ambiguity, with directives for the application of the approach developed here to their analysis.

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