

December, 2014

Brevity, by Laurence Goldstein

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Laurence Goldstein (ed.)

Brevity.

Oxford University Press 2013.

368 pages

\$135.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780199664986)

Brevity grew out of a series of workshops. Over four years, a core group met annually, with additional specialists being invited each time. As noted in the Preface, ‘the aim of this project was to work towards an understanding of the psycholinguistic mechanisms at play’ in brevity (vii). The papers included here are mostly by the workshop participants, save for two essays commissioned to fill gaps, those by Eve V. Clark and Chigusa Kurumada, and by Julie Sedivy.

As the editor of the volume drives home, brevity in speech and thought is an amazing cognitive achievement. It is an astonishing skill, yet it is frequently manifested effortlessly ‘by even the dim-witted’ (1). As he rightly adds, it therefore calls for philosophical, linguistic and psychological reflection. Among the questions that call out for answers—and which seem, given the promotional materials, the Preface and the Introduction, to be at the heart of the volume—are: What is brevity? Are there different kinds of brevity, subserved by different cognitive mechanisms? And if so, what are these?

The book offers partial answers to this triad of questions. Brevity might seem to be always a matter of leaving something out: a kind of ellipsis, broadly construed. And surely we do often use less than we could have, yet still get the message across. But, as Matthew Stone stresses in his contribution, brevity is also at play when one overloads perfectly ordinary speaking to achieve multiple goals simultaneously. So brevity is ultimately a matter of a mismatch between what’s explicitly present, in language or in a mental representation, and the whole content. It’s linguistico-cognitive efficiency. Even more broadly, brevity is about achieving a goal with a less demanding tool, or achieving multiple goals with one tool. (While most of the papers treat of linguistic brevity, Christopher Gauker’s contribution focuses squarely on cognitive brevity, which he labels ‘inexplicit thought’.)

Turning to kinds of brevity, many are discussed: acronyms, complement omission, conjunction reduction, domain restriction, extralinguistic gesture, incomplete utterances, indexicals and demonstratives, metonymy, polysemy, presupposition, pronoun omission, pronouns of laziness, verb phrase ellipsis, and more. One must mention too: relying on saliency/shared background, and sometimes on highly specialized knowledge (e.g., of a sport or an academic discipline), to convey more than one says. Conversational implicature, where the hearer needs to find the full message conveyed though not literally stated, falls here. So does free pragmatic enrichment, if such there be, where the hearer needs to use similar kinds of global cognitive processes to find what is literally stated, asked, commanded, etc. (E.g., if a speaker says ‘Maria needs a husband. Find her a bachelor’, the literal order excludes priests, young boys, gay men, etc.)

The foregoing seem to us to fall into four sub-kinds. On the one hand, as already hinted, there is a contrast between what we hereby label conventional brevity versus speaker brevity. That is, the first group illustrates tools which languages make available for efficient communication; the second group exemplifies on-the-fly ways in which speakers cleverly exploit the conversational situation. On the other hand, there is a contrast between abbreviation licensed specifically by surrounding discourse, and brevity licensed also by the physical context and the manifest psychological states of participants. We may sum up with a simplified taxonomy, with an example or two for each:

	Speaker brevity	Conventional brevity
Licensed specifically by linguistic context		Anaphora Verb Phrase Ellipsis and Sluicing
Licensed also by extra-linguistic context	Conversational implicature	Indexicals and Demonstratives Omitted complements

Assuming all this is on the right track, one might understand much of *Brevity* as addressing the question of which sub-varieties of brevity belong in which quadrant. Closely related to this is a question about the psychological divides among mechanisms for achieving brevity, whether specifically linguistic or not. Some cases are fairly clear, but many are hotly disputed. For instance, do the many alleged cases of free pragmatic enrichment really belong in the lower left? Or do they rather belong in the lower right, as fans of ‘hidden indexicals’ such as Jason Stanley imagine? More specifically, where does sub-sentential speech belong? Jason Merchant, Lyn Frazier, Charles Clifton Jr. and Thomas Weskott would assimilate it to syntactic ellipsis, whereas Reinaldo Elugardo and Anne Bezuidenhout treat it as speaker brevity, licensed by ‘broad context’. Or again, consider so-called non-c-command anaphora such as ‘I saw a man. He was dressed in black’. Is ‘He’ genuinely anaphoric, even though not within the scope of ‘a man’? If so, we have a case that belongs in the upper right quadrant. But if the phrase ‘a man’ makes something salient in the non-linguistic context, then ‘He’ is actually deictic, and the example fits in the lower right.

We have so far suggested that one might take the heart of *Brevity* to pertain to the nature and varieties of brevity, and the psychological mechanisms at work. That’s slightly misleading. Many papers, though they at least connect to brevity, don’t really address this. Numerous others seem to have nothing to do with brevity at all: e.g., Andreas Stokke defending context change potentials as meanings; Manuel García-Carpintero on Stalnaker-style approaches to presupposition; and Ira Noveck and Nicola Spotorno on their concept of ‘narrowing’ in pragmatics. Rather, the book’s 17 essays are actually structured by the editor into four parts: I. Brevity in Language and Thought; II.

The Philosophy of Brevity; III. Experimenting with Brevity; and IV. Prolixity. To give the idea, Part I includes discussion of whether sub-sentential speech should be treated as a kind of formal ellipsis, as free pragmatic enrichment, or as something else—with four papers by Merchant *et al.*, Bezuidenhout, Elugardo, and Eleni Gregoromichelaki, Ronnie Cann and Ruth Kempson. Also addressed, by Anouch Bourmayan and François Récanati, is what goes on when an intransitive verb such as ‘eat’ is used as if it were transitive, but with an implicit object. (Their intriguing idea is that the implicit object is supplied situation-theoretically, à la John Perry, a novel option in the free-pragmatic-enrichment literature). Part II treats of connections between brevity and such linguistico-philosophical issues as opacity (Laurence Goldstein), compositionality (F. Jeffry Pelletier) and presupposition (Stokke and García-Carpintero). Part III considers issues such as how children acquire the ability to be brief (Clark and Kurumada), and how speakers deploy information about what the hearer can perceive in fine-tuning their contributions (Julie Sedivy, along with Daniel J. Grodner and Rachel M. Adler). Finally, Part IV consists of a single paper called ‘Relevance Theory and Prolixity’ by Friedrich Christoph Doerge on how to explain those rare cases in which speakers opt not for brevity but its opposite: Was Grice on the right track in understanding prolixity, or were Relevance Theorists?

Having briefly described both what the book initially appears to be about, and what it ultimately treats of, we turn to evaluation. Obviously we cannot address all 17 contributions. Instead, we will highlight just a few.

The section on experimental pragmatics and brevity is one of the strongest. Clark and Kurumada report here the fascinating discovery that children move from being brief of necessity to being brief as a matter of choice. In particular, children’s mean length of utterance goes up between birth and four, rising to 3.3 words-per-utterance, but then goes down again around five years of age, to 2.7 wpu. What this suggests is that, after a certain threshold, speakers can opt to be more concise. Sedivy’s paper is also top-notch. It provides a convincing general vindication of the Gricean account of brevity as tracing to pragmatics rather than convention. Finally, like numerous other authors, Grodner and Adler underscore that brevity is collaborative and cooperative, and that speakers must somehow take their hearer’s abilities into account. However, *to what extent and when* are communicators egocentric in their choice of wording? For instance, do they use their own point of view unless a misunderstanding arises? Or do they take their hearer’s perspective into account right from the start? Put otherwise, is brevity primarily driven by the speaker’s egocentric wants, or is anticipation of the hearer’s requirements there from the outset? (Their answer is: it’s complicated.)

We would also single out Bezuidenhout and Elugardo’s papers. Both offer excellent defenses of the genuineness and importance of sub-sentential speech. Bezuidenhout stresses that semantic constraints, listed in the lexicon, can partially explain the data that Merchant *et al.* sketch, so that their findings do not ultimately support syntactic ellipsis. Also, it appears that the ellipsis approach gets the order of processing wrong: on that view, the hearer first grasps the content meant, and then uses this to construct a specific syntactic item. But, as Alison Hall has pointed out, that would introduce an absurd epicycle. (On a related note, Bezuidenhout, Gregoromichelaki *et al.* and Michael

Glanzberg all make important contributions to our understanding of how specifically linguistic context plays a part in licensing ellipsis in particular and brevity in general.) Elugardo shows that appeals to Perry-style ‘concerning’ cannot avoid pragmatic determinants of literal speech act content in sub-sentential speech.

Continuing with the evaluation of specific papers, let us say a word about Goldstein’s two contributions, his paper ‘Some Consequences of “Speaking Loosely”’ and the Introduction. Professor Goldstein tragically passed away recently, and was much beloved. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that his contributions to the volume are among the weakest. In his article, he tries but fails to address a variety of philosophical puzzles by appeal to loose talk. For example, he attempts to solve Frege’s puzzle about identity, and address the larger issue of opacity, in this way. But, frankly, anyone familiar with Frege scholarship will find the attempt somewhat naive. As for his Introduction, it is not very helpful or informative. Let us focus on an example that one of us has particular expertise in, namely sub-sentential speech. In trying to explain the debate, Goldstein doesn’t ultimately seem to grasp the difference among a bare word or phrase, a short sentence, a fragment of an ordinary sentence, and a syntactically elliptical sentence (6). He infers from the fact that a phrase like ‘On the top of the shelf’ has multiple uses immediately to the conclusion that it is multiply ambiguous. Worse, he attributes this stance to Elugardo, whose whole thrust is to reject the postulation of an ambiguity in favour of a pragmatic account (11). He supposes that there is something problematic about explaining conversational skills in terms of grasping propositions, because the latter are abstract (7)—though words and sentences are abstract too, and surely we grasp those during conversation! Finally, he understands it to be an advantage of Gauker and Gregoromichelaki *et al.*’s approaches (over say Relevance Theory and Stainton’s view), that they allow for communication that is sub-propositional. But everyone in this debate allows that; and (pretty much) everyone involved allows that the content of a thought can depend on the situation, without the mental representation having a ‘slot’ to be filled in. (Relevance Theory’s notion of manifestness permits exactly this; it is, in this regard, radically externalist.)

In sum, how would we evaluate the volume as a whole? Brevity truly is an amazing cognitive achievement—one which generally goes unremarked, because it is so ubiquitous. Studying it and its cognitive underpinnings offers a great opportunity for collaborative work, drawing on a wide range of methodologies. What’s more, as hinted above, there are big questions that could have united the volume. Overall, sadly, we judge this somewhat a missed opportunity.

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