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# Philosophy of Language

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Žegarac, V. (1998) 'What is phatic communication?', in V. Rouchota and A. Jucker (eds) *Current Issues in Relevance Theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

## Philosophy of Language

### Introduction: preliminaries and game plan

Philosophy of language is an extraordinarily rich field. It has a history stretching back, in the Western tradition, to the pre-Socratics. And, in the last century or so, it has been of central concern in both the Anglo-American and Continental traditions. Obviously, a brief survey cannot hope to cover such intellectual abundance. What's more, as this encyclopedia itself attests to, **pragmatics** is an equally rich academic endeavour. Any mere overview of their intersection must, then, narrow its focus. As a result, my specific topic will be: What has Anglo-American philosophy of language contributed to the study of utterance meaning in **context**?

The game plan is as follows. I present two traditional perspectives in philosophy of language, and describe some illustrative contributions of each to pragmatics. I end by explaining how these two philosophical perspectives have recently been combined, thereby affording a still richer and deeper contribution to pragmatics.

### Two traditional perspectives in philosophy of language

It is a simplification, not to say artificial, to summarize twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy of language in terms of only two dominant perspectives. Nevertheless, given the expository purposes of this article, that's mostly what I will do.

One tradition, call it the System Perspective, thinks of a language as a collection of formal rules: rules which are so simple as to require no insight to apply them. A language, on this view, is like an algebra, with its axioms and rules of proof. System Theorists have mainly focused on two kinds of rules: those of **syntax** (which describe how minimal linguistic elements are put together into complex wholes) and those of **semantics** (which describe what each minimal linguistic element means in the language, and

how the meaning of complexes depends upon such part-meanings, together with the contributions of syntax). It is no accident that these two, syntax and semantics, also constitute the core of artificial logical languages: System Theorists self-avowedly take such languages as their models, not least because one of their aims is to capture logical relations among natural language sentences.

This may sound very much like the project of Chomskyan generative grammar. And, indeed, Chomsky's earliest work finds its roots in the System Perspective. But there remains a fundamental difference. For the philosopher of language who inclines towards the System Perspective, and in sharp contrast to the approach of generative grammarians, the rules presented are not designed to capture how we humans mentally process language, any more than formal logic seeks to characterize the psychological processes involved in human **reasoning**. To offer a standard comparison: for the System Theorist, to describe a language is akin to laying out the rules of chess itself, as opposed to offering a description of the thinking processes within a given chess player. (For discussion, see George 1989; Iten et al. 2007; Katz 1981, 1985; Lewis 1975b; Soames 1984, 1985).

The parallel between a language as construed by the System Theorist and an algebra leads to the next key feature of the System Perspective: its understanding of what a 'linguistic item' is. A linguistic item, on this view, whether a word, phrase or sentence, is something that exists in abstraction from use and users. Linguistic items are types, as opposed to tokens/instances/utterances of those types. (For those unfamiliar with the type/token contrast, think of the difference between the novel *War and Peace* itself and the tens of thousands of copies of this novel. Each copy has a certain weight and extension, a certain location, etc. This is like the *tokens* of linguistic symbols: they are spatiotemporally located specific instances, with all the associated physical features of physical objects. But the novel itself is not located in any one place, has no specific weight, etc. This is like a linguistic type.) Linguistic items, on this view, are thus outside us. Indeed, they are outside the physical world as a whole: like numbers, sentences, phrases and words – the types, that is – are not

spatiotemporal entities. And, crucially, it is these types that are the proper object of study according to the System Perspective.

To each perspective there corresponds a theory of what meanings are. Speaking roughly, what I am calling the System Perspective takes meanings to be extra-mental things. And, consonant with its view of linguistic items, meanings are also abstract for the System Theorist: they include sets of possible worlds, sets of properties, and functions (in the mathematical sense of a mapping) from two truth values to one truth value. (Notice, since it will be important in what follows, that all of these meaning-entities have something to do with truth.)

The second traditional perspective could not be more different. According to the Use Perspective, as I will call it, a language is a socio-cultural practice. It emphasizes what we *do* with language. Describing a language, on the Use Perspective, is more like describing a folk dance than it is recounting the abstract rules of a formal game. What's more, it is crucial for Use Theorists that humans do not merely use languages to *describe* the world (which, insofar as usage comes into it at all, is the implicit focus of the System Perspective). As they stress, we also use it to get married, issue verdicts, name ships, make promises, etc. Related to this, a 'linguistic item' according to the Use Perspective is a **speech act** – a linguistic token, rather than a type. Thus, linguistic items are not so much abstract posits as concrete performances.

Just as the System Perspective has an associated view of what meanings are, the Use Perspective does as well. Words on this second view are tools. And their meanings, rather than being abstract objects such as mathematical functions and sets of possible worlds, are actions that we humans perform linguistically. For instance, the meaning of 'Hello' is not some truth-relevant quasi-mathematical *entity*. Instead, to give the meaning of 'Hello' it is enough to say: 'One uses this word to greet people.'

Since it will prove important in the final section of this article, it is worth stressing here again that the aim of the Use Theorist is to capture linguistic action, rather than inner mental 'goings on'. Even though various psychological activities take place when we speak and understand, they are not supposed, even by the Use

Theorist, to be relevant to the philosophy of language proper. (Recalling the comparison with a folk dance, there seems no need for a cultural ethnographer to speculate about the psychological mechanisms that permit people to perform a dance. He or she need merely describe its motions, its cultural significance, and so forth.)

To sum up so far, the System Perspective, as I have labeled it, treats a language as an algebra-like collection of syntactic and semantic rules. The items of a language are abstract (types, rather than tokens) and their meanings are abstract too (e.g. functions and sets of worlds). It is essential to stress that inclining towards this perspective does not entail adopting every tenet noted above. For instance, some of those that are best classed as System Theorists nonetheless eschew possible worlds in favour of structurally rich **propositions**, and some recognize contents that go beyond truth conditions. Taking that into account, central figures who lean towards the System Perspective include Frege (1892, 1918), **Wittgenstein** (1922) in his early writings, Tarski (1944), Davidson (1967) and Montague (1968). The Use Perspective, in contrast, treats a language as a socio-cultural activity. The items of a language are spatiotemporally located speech acts, and linguistic meanings are the actions one can perform using language. Noting again that I am simplifying for the purposes of exposition, key figures in this tradition include **Austin** (1961, 1962), the later Wittgenstein (1953b, 1958), and Strawson (1956).

### Illustrative contributions of each perspective to pragmatics

I turn now to the respective contributions of the two philosophical perspectives to the study of utterance meaning in context. Two contributions from the System Perspective come immediately to mind. First, the System Perspective tells us about the standing meaning of words, phrases and sentences, that is, what they mean *in the common language*. This is vital for pragmatics because utterances in context receive part of their meaning from the meaning of the types of which they are tokens. In particular, the System Perspective addresses, at least in part, the question of how utterances of words and sentences

manage to be about our world: they manage this because they are tokens of types which, as the System Perspective highlights, are themselves about our world.

One might reasonably complain: 'We don't need all the formal complexity and abstractness of the System Perspective to tell us about the standing meaning of linguistic items. We merely need to describe the use to which the various linguistic tools are put.' But, I would insist, this overlooks a more specific contribution of the System Perspective. Only given the resources of the System Perspective can we explain the unbounded *productivity* of human speech: the System Perspective's rules are recursive (i.e. the output of a rule can serve, once again, as an input) and the meaning of each sentence is determined compositionally (i.e. the meaning of the type is exhausted by what its minimal linguistic elements mean, and how those parts are put together by the syntactic rules). These two features yield a potential infinity of meaningful expression types, including ones that have never before been tokened. The need for this kind of complex machinery can be illustrated with a relatively simple example. The study of utterances in context needs to say how a particular use of, for example, 'Last night I dreamed that I spoke with a tiny pink elephant in the University of Western Ontario student centre' manages to mean what it does. This requires saying what this sentence type means, which in turn requires the kind of complex and abstract rules afforded by the System Perspective.

Second, the System Perspective has afforded invaluable insights into an important way in which utterance meaning, in a specific context, typically outstrips the standing meaning of the linguistic expression used. Specifically, it has provided insights into certain features of utterance meaning that, though they do not *derive* entirely from standing meaning alone, are nevertheless highly *constrained* by it. Examples of this kind of linguistically constrained contribution by context include **demonstratives** ('this', 'that'), pure **indexicals** ('here', 'now', 'I'), and tense markers.

The details are not especially important for present purposes. Nonetheless, here is a brief example to spell out the idea. To account for how (certain) context-sensitive words help to fix

utterance content, philosophers such as Kaplan (1989a) and Stalnaker (1970, 1978) introduced the notion of a *character*. This is a function (again, in the mathematical sense of 'function') from certain aspects of a context to a truth-relevant entity. For instance, the standing meaning of 'I once lived here' would be such a character: specifically, a function from triples of <person, time, location> to a proposition about the person who is the speaker in the context, to the effect that he or she lived at the location of the context at some point prior to the time of the context. Hence, should this sentence be spoken by, say, Noam Chomsky, in Boston, on January 1st, 2009, the character of the sentence would, by means of a language-internal rule, deliver as output the content NOAM CHOMSKY ONCE LIVED IN BOSTON AT SOME POINT PRIOR TO JANUARY 1st, 2009. The key point is that the System Perspective not only helps us understand utterance meaning as deriving directly from context-insensitive type meaning, it also helps us understand how utterance meaning is fixed by variable context.

Let's turn now to some illustrative contributions from the Use Perspective. These come in two flavours: literal and non-literal utterance content. Use Theorists pointed out early on that there at least two kinds of content that are literal – indeed, contents which derive wholly from the meaning of the type itself – but which the System Perspective tended to ignore. These are contents that seemingly do not alter the truth conditions of the utterance, but nevertheless contribute to its literal meaning. One sub-variety, which **Grice** labeled 'conventional **implicatures**', shows something about the speaker's attitude towards the truth conditions of the utterance, e.g. that he or she finds them surprising, or in tension with each other. Instances include 'surprisingly', 'but', and 'therefore'. Thus, putting things roughly, to say 'Surprisingly, John won' is truth conditionally equivalent to 'John won.' However, using the former sentence is a way of linguistically indicating surprise.

Syntactic mood affords another example of non-truth-conditional content that attaches to the expression type. Mood is an indicator of illocutionary force potential. Thus, the sentences 'Chomsky left' and 'Did Chomsky leave?' per-

tain to the exact same topic, that is, their truth-conditional contents are identical. But they are by no means synonymous sentences. Instead, the declarative mood of the former sentence encodes, as part of its content in the language, that the illocutionary force is assertoric, whereas the interrogative mood of the latter sentence encodes that the illocutionary force is interrogative. Crudely, the import of these illocutionary forces is that the first sentence has a 'use-theoretic' content *USED TO STATE*, while the second sentence has a 'use-theoretic' content *USED TO ASK*. Other force indicators are more specific and, rather than attaching to syntactic mood, they are carried by an explicitly performative verb, such as 'promise', 'swear' and 'pronounce'. Thus, the expressions 'I promise to -' and 'I swear to -' wear their use-theoretic contents on their sleeves: the first has as part of its content *USED TO PROMISE* while the second has as part of its content *USED TO SWEAR*.

In addition to linguistically constrained contributions to literal content that involve pragmatics, the Use Perspective has contributed enormously to our understanding of non-literal usages. Such features of utterance content, that are shaped more by speaker's **intentions** than by standing meaning, include conversational implicatures, speaker's **reference**, metaphorical speech, and indirect speech acts. Each of these is described elsewhere in this volume. It suffices, then, to provide a quick example of each. Saying 'I am French' to convey that one is a good cook illustrates conversational implicature: the speaker says one thing but implies another. An example of speaker's reference would be using 'Jake's mother' to speak of Jake's much older sister. This phrase does not itself designate the sister. Yet, in the right circumstances, a speaker may manage nonetheless to refer to Jake's sister with these words. Metaphorical speech is familiar to all. For instance, Dylan Thomas famously wrote about his father, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', meaning that the latter should fight to remain alive. Finally, indirect speech acts include using an interrogative, the assigned use of which is asking a **question**, to make a **request**. 'Do you have any cold beer in the fridge?' may be used, in context, not to enquire but to request politely. Use Theorists who made

such contributions in this regard include Donnellan (1966), Grice (1975) and **Searle** (1975b, 1979a).

To recapitulate, I have summarized recent Anglo-American philosophy of language by presenting two (idealized) traditions: the System Perspective and the Use Perspective. I have also illustrated some of the contributions of each tradition to pragmatics, here understood as the study of utterance meaning in context. Many more examples could be presented, but the above provide sufficient background to move forward. The final section will describe a revolutionary means of combining the two perspectives.

### Combining the two perspectives

Our problem amounts to this. Given that the two perspectives are complementary in numerous ways, we ought to combine them. Yet, they appear to be in deep conflict about many fundamental matters. So, unifying them seems difficult if not impossible.

Let's first revisit the obstacles to unification. The two perspectives disagree about what a language is (a collection of formal rules versus a socio-cultural practice), what a linguistic item is (an abstract type versus a concrete performance) and about what meanings are (abstract truth-relevant entities versus actions). In short, one tradition focuses on users and usage, while the other abstracts away from them. Another problem for combining the two perspectives is what I will call the 'ontological gap'. Linguistic types are abstract entities. Existing outside space and time, they cannot themselves cause utterances. And, in turn, no collection of utterances, no matter how large, in and of itself constitutes a type. On a related note, Use Theorists are wont to insist on the many diverse actions we perform with language, and on the contextually bound, creative jumble that is actual talk, whereas System Theorists highlight the pristine elegance and compositional-recursive power of languages themselves. Even setting aside their disagreements about what languages, linguistic items and meanings are, then, how can the two perspectives be combined, if there is such an enormous metaphysical gulf between their respective objects of study?

Yet, as noted, there are many reasons to hope for a unification of the two perspectives. In particular, each covers the other's omissions. In terms of content, both truth-theoretic meaning and use-theoretic meaning (e.g. conventional implicatures and illocutionary force) are necessary for a complete account of natural language. Similarly, non-literal content is important, but so is literal content: it's essential to keep in mind the enormous part that standing meaning, i.e. the meaning of the type, plays in fixing utterance content. And in terms of philosophical orientation, it seems that language is productive and rich in both senses canvassed in the last paragraph: context-invariant generative capacity *and* creative usage in context.

In short, while it seems hard to unify the two perspectives, there are strong reasons for doing so. The solution I would like to draw attention to is inspired by the work of the linguist-philosophers Chomsky (1986), Fodor (1983), and especially Sperber and Wilson (1995). They reject a common commitment of both traditional perspectives, namely, that psychology is irrelevant to the philosophy of language. Yes, language is a system of symbols but, crucially, it is a system which we humans *know*. And it is precisely because knowledge of linguistic rules is stored in the mind/brain that it can give rise to use.

The first advantage of this approach is that it bridges the ontological gap. Abstract entities may not cause utterances, but mental states can. And, while no collection of utterances can give rise to types, mental processes can extract type meaning from a collection of tokens. So, knowledge of the system bridges the gulf between linguistic types and tokens. In a similar vein, we can admit both kinds of creativity (i.e. within the language itself and in usage) by distinguishing, as Chomsky does, between **competence** and performance. The former consists in the rules known. Importantly, however, linguistic competence is only one of the causes of performance: our performance (i.e. actual speech) is an interaction effect of such knowledge with much else besides. That's why we get gloriously near-anarchic speech from such highly structured linguistic rules.

Recognizing that we know the system also makes it easy to accommodate all the varieties of content discussed above. With respect to literal

content of utterances, our knowledge of language includes (a), (b) and (c):

- (a) Knowledge of the truth-relevant content of context insensitive minimal elements
- (b) Knowledge of the character of context sensitive minimal elements
- (c) Knowledge of the non-truth-conditional content of minimal elements

(In addition, to account for the productivity of speech, note that we also know the recursive syntactic rules for putting the minimal elements together, and the semantic rules for computing the meaning of a complex expression on the basis of its syntax and the truth-theoretic and use-theoretic content of its parts.) With respect to non-literal content, we also know many non-linguistic facts which allow us to interpret speech in ways that knowledge of language alone would not permit. We know general facts about the world and about people, and we know specific facts about the speech situation. Finally, we are able to combine such knowledge with the information that language proper affords. It is this diversity of mental capacities that allows us to go from the literal content of the utterance in context, as afforded by highly constrained linguistic rules, to non-literal contents.

I would summarize the proposed unification with a slogan: 'Language is by equal measures a system of symbols which we know and use'. That is, it is fundamentally and essentially all three. This merges the two traditional philosophical perspectives. It thereby allows their independent contributions to come together – yielding a still deeper and richer contribution of recent Anglo-American philosophy of language to the study of utterance content in context.

R.S.

**See also:** Assertion; Austin, J.L.; Bar-Hillel, Y.; competence, linguistic; competence, pragmatic; context; cooperative principle; demonstratives; explicit/implicit distinction; formal pragmatics; Grice, H.P.; implicature; indexicals; intention; logical form; maxims of conversation; metaphor; modular pragmatics; modularity of mind thesis; neo-Gricean pragmatics; ordinary language phi-

philosophy; philosophy of mind; primary pragmatic processes; proposition; propositional attitudes; question; radical pragmatics; reasoning; reference; relevance theory; scalar implicature; Searle, J.; semantic minimalism; semantics-pragmatics interface; speech act theory; utterance interpretation; Wittgenstein, L.

### Suggestions for further reading

- Carston, R. (2002) *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lycan, W.G. (2000) *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Stainton, R.J. (1996) *Philosophical Perspectives on Language*, Peterborough, ON: Broadview.

## Philosophy of Mind

Debates within philosophy of mind often begin by examining the relationship between minds and bodies. Since minds and bodies seem so different, it is natural to see them as different sorts of substances. This view, called mind-body dualism, has been so associated with René Descartes (1641, 1649) that it is often called 'Cartesian dualism'. These Cartesian dualists cannot see how a merely physical thing could, *inter alia*, think, talk, exhibit consciousness, exhibit **rationality**, or see itself and others as having minds. Hence, something distinct must serve as the seat of these mental features – a mental substance. Although initially appealing, this view has two major drawbacks. First, it fails to explain how mental substances are any more capable of having these features than physical substances – it simply asserts that the former substance has them. Second, dualists portray mental features as being so distinct from physical features that an obvious fact – that the mind and body interact – becomes deeply mysterious. Dualists must either deny mind-body interaction or generate some suitable explanation as to how such radically distinct things can interact with one another. Each of these options has sustained critiques so severe that many have been led to adopt some form of monism – either everything is mental (idealism) or the more widely held view that

everything is physical or material (physicalism or materialism).

In the wake of Chomsky's (1959) attack on behaviourism, two major materialist theories about the nature of mental states have emerged: the (psychophysical) identity theory and functionalism. The identity theory identifies mental states with states of the human central nervous system (Place 1956; Smart 1959). Just as scientists have established such identities as 'water = H<sub>2</sub>O' and 'lightning = electrical discharge', it is hoped that scientists could generate identities between a mental category and a neurological category, as in the oft-used example of 'pain = c-fibre firing'. Functionalists, however, criticized this theory for being too restrictive and chauvinistic (Putnam 1967). Inspired by the idea that thought is quite like computation, and noting that computing devices can be constructed out of a number of different physical materials, yet still execute the same function, program, or algorithm, philosophers thought that thinking and feeling could also take place in a number of different materials. Putnam argued that whether some entity counts as a mental state is not determined by what it is made out of, but rather by what it does, i.e. its functional role in the mind. For example, anything that performs the same function as pain – being caused by tissue damage, causing further mental states, leading to overt behaviour, etc. – counts as being a pain. Since creatures like the octopus, with nervous systems very different from that of a human, have parts that play functionally isomorphic roles to pain in humans (not to mention robots or Martians!), pain cannot be identified as c-fibre firing. Since pain and other mental states are, in Putnam's words 'multiply realizable' in different sorts of things, mental states should be identified by their functional role and not by what they are made out of.

Despite being the most widely held theory about the nature of mental states (for varieties see Block 1980a, 1980b), functionalism has been criticized for being too liberal in its articulation of mentality. Block (1978) argues that there is no way for a functionalist to identify the functional roles of mental states in such a way that avoids having complex systems that lack a mind (e.g. groups of organisms, economic systems) count as functionally isomorphic to minds – and hence,