Chi-Hé Elder, University of East Anglia

Research project: 'Pragmatics in interaction: An exploration of miscommunication'

1. RESEARCH CONTEXT

On current and traditional theories of meanings – those stemming from Grice (1975) and the ones most familiar to linguists – meanings of sentences used in discourse are informed by speakers' intentions. On this view, 'successful communication' is defined in terms of the hearer successfully comprehending the speaker's intended meaning. But this model does not always apply to real communication: what is meant/understood may not always be precisely common to both speaker and hearer. Despite two decades of research on discourse structure, we still lack an adequate account of the incremental discourse processing of inter-sentential relations. I propose to explore cases of *mis*communication to examine how meanings emerge in actual communication, with the theoretical goal of developing a theory of meaning that has the explanatory power to account for empirical data, i.e. examples of imperfect or unsuccessful communication.

Instead of focussing on speakers' meaning, one post-Gricean theory (Relevance Theory: e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1986/95) models *hearers'* comprehension of utterances to get around the fact that speakers do not always have determinate intentions. Other theorists have noted that a speaker can be deliberately vague, taking on board the interpretation of the hearer (Clark 1997); or something may be unintended by the speaker, but difficult to dismiss by the hearer, in essence, allowing the hearer to inform the speaker's meaning (Haugh 2008). In light of the increasing build up of empirical evidence that in 'real-life' communication, what is meant by the speaker could substantially differ from what is understood by the hearer , in seriously seeking a theory of linguistic communication, I re-open the question of whose perspective should take precedence when theorising about meanings.

In opposition to the post-Gricean framework, 'interactional' accounts of meaning have arisen, where "meaning lies not with the speaker nor the addressee nor the utterance alone as many philosophical arguments have considered, but rather with the interactional past, current, and projected next moment" (Schegloff et al. 1996). Rather than ascribing stable meanings to individual utterances, meanings are said to 'emerge' over time (i.e. incrementally) as discourse progresses. Such an approach essentially locates meaning beyond individual speakers and hearers. But while this tradition of ethnomethodology provides a method for analysing relations between turns in discourse, it precludes theorising about intentions and inferences: by ignoring the role of intentions in ascribing meanings altogether, speakers bear no responsibility for what they say, always letting them 'off the hook'.

Furthermore, even if the unit of theorising is located beyond individual speakers and hearers, it doesn't mean that those speakers and hearers come to the same understandings. Indeed, in an interactional achievement account, one can interactionally achieve diverging meanings alongside converging ones. I thus propose that a positive eclective approach using aspects of both accounts – the Gricean one and the interactional one – may provide the right results that will enable us to fully understand communication.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key objective of this research project is to investigate the interaction between utterance meanings and discourse meanings, addressing the question of what counts as successful communication and how it is achieved. More specifically, the project will pose the following research questions:

[1]   Whose perspective should take precedence when theorising about meanings, and, relatedly, what is the role of speakers' intentions in meaning recovery?

[2]   To what extent are individual utterances an appropriate unit of investigation with regard to communication in general, and can an account of utterance meaning be combined with one of discourse meaning?

[3]   What generalisations can we draw about the sources of information that facilitate communication and how speakers draw on them?

3. METHODOLOGY

The overall approach will be a combination of theoretical and empirical methods. The theoretical contribution will be a rethinking of what counts as successful communication, to be supplemented by two empirical studies.

The first empirical study will use a self-compiled corpus of miscommunication in TV audio-visual recordings, identifying the sources of information that lead to communication breakdown. The benefit of using TV scripts lies in the potential for metapragmatic insights: the analyst's position as the intended TV audience facilitates identification of instances of miscommunication where misalignment of the common ground between interlocutors is exploited for humorous effect. Looking at the sources of information that lead to miscommunication facilitates our understanding of the key sources at play in instances of successful communication. The second corpus study will identify cases of emergent and dynamic meanings in discourse. I will analyse recordings of face-to-face English dialogue using spoken data from the British National Corpus (BNC), recently made available in digital form. I will use the methods of Conversation Analysis to examine the roles of past and future utterances surrounding a target utterance. The key question will be whether utterances retain stable meanings over time, or whether and how meanings of past utterances are 'updated' to reflect the future direction of the discourse.

The overall aim is to merge current post-Gricean approaches to meaning with interactional ones to develop a redefinition of 'successful communication'. This will be achieved by examining (i) the sources of information that contribute to meanings (e.g. issues of timings, other utterances in the discourse), (ii) what level we should describe meanings at (utterance, discourse, or both), and (iii) if meanings are co-created "on-the-fly" by all participants, or if speakers always need to communicate their intentions in order for communication to be successful. The results of this project will significantly further pragmatic theory by providing an empirically-informed, fine-grained analysis of meanings in discourse, contributing a much-needed interpretation of communication from a multi-faceted point of view. The outcomes of this research have ramifications for real-life communication conflict resolution: in many different discourse contexts (e.g. legal, political, pedagogical), consequences hinge on the outcomes of successful communication. If communication breakdown occurs in such contexts, the impact of the ensuing communicative conflict can translate into conflicts that go beyond that of mere linguistic exchange.

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