Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*


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1. Introduction

The book under review (Carston 2002) is one of the most stimulating pieces of work in pragmatics, especially on the analyses of the interaction of pragmatics with semantics in utterance interpretations. The main and underlying claim throughout this book is what Carston calls the *linguistic underdeterminacy thesis*: the meaning encoded in the linguistic expressions used in the utterance underdetermines the proposition expressed. The arguments and analyses are developed within the framework of Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), and so the approach is entirely in terms of the mental representations and processes involved in a cognitive account of utterance understanding.

It is well known that there is often a divergence between what a person says and what she means, as seen in the clearest cases of an ironical utterance (1) and a metaphorical one (2).

(1) (Interlocutors know that Joan has a very poor sense of direction) With her excellent spatial sense, Joan is sure to find a shortcut and be the first to arrive.

(2) When she doesn't get her own way Mary becomes a raging inferno.

The traditional view is that semantics determines 'what is said' and pragmatics derives 'what is implicated'. One of the greatest contributions of this book is that it persuasively exemplifies that the semantics/pragmatics distinction is not parallel to the distinction between what is explicitly and implicitly communicated by the utterance, and that it is pragmatics (inference) rather than semantics (decoding) which plays a major role in interpreting utterances.

2. Composition

This book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 convincingly introduces the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis, stated above, based on a variety of data, some of which are the following:

(3) a. On the top shelf.

b. Paracetamol is better.
c. The north island is some distance from the south island.
d. There's nothing on telly tonight.

(4) a. The marmalade is on the top shelf.
b. Paracetamol is better than Aspirin.
c. The north island is further from the south island than you think.
d. There's no programmes worth watching on telly tonight.

Each example of (3) requires pragmatic processes to arrive at the proposition intended by the speaker, as in (4). These data show that the proposition (truth conditional content) expressed by the utterance cannot be determined only by the encoded meanings. Carston makes the case that linguistic underdeterminacy is an essential feature of natural languages because there are no eternal sentences, that is, there are no proposition-determining and context-insensitive sentences whose truth values stay fixed through time and from speaker to speaker.

She also claims that the primary mental capacity underlying the communicative and interpretive powers of humans is the capacity to infer the mental states of others, i.e., the ‘mind-reading’ capacity. Imagine observing the following scene, cited by Carston (p. 42).

(5) a man slowly lowers himself, head and arms first, down into a hole in the ground while another man holds on to his legs.

Very few observers will represent this scene to themselves as I have just described it and leave it at that; most of us will look for some plausible beliefs, desires and/ or intentions that we can attribute to these two men. For instance, we may attribute to both men a belief that there is something worth retrieving down in that hole, to the first man an intention to retrieve it, to the second man a belief that the first may fall into the hole and hurt himself if his legs are not held, etc. We can’t help doing this sort of thing, that is, we can’t help attributing beliefs, desires and intentions to others. In more general terms, we can’t help trying to read others’ mind.

Continuing the scenario (p. 44):

(6) The second man, who is holding the legs of the first, swivels his eyes leftwards in our direction and starts to jerk his head quite violently from left to right.

It is likely that we’ll take him to be communicating something to us, say, something like ‘I want you to help me.’ Note that communication is achieved here without any element of encoding. Carston maintains that what makes our communication basically possible is not language but our pragmatic inferential ability, and that with this powerful ‘mind-reading’ capacity, the language system does not need
to have the resources to encode the propositions speakers succeed in expressing. What the coded bits of an utterance do is to set the inferential process on the right track.

Chapter 2 considers ways in which the distinction between the proposition (explicitly) expressed by the speaker and the propositions she has implicated may be drawn. The point of departure in a discussion of the explicit/implicit distinction in verbal communication is the semantics/pragmatics distinction. The relation has been held to be one of identity: linguistic meaning (semantics) gives you explicit content, and the residue of utterance meaning (pragmatically derived) is the implicit import (implicatures) of the utterance. This is reflected in Grice’s and his followers’ distinction between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’. The former is fundamentally based on the decoded meaning (plus minimal pragmatic contribution to get a truth-evaluable proposition, i.e., reference assignment + disambiguation). The latter is drawn genuinely by pragmatic inferences. The point of this chapter is that, in the cognitive processing account of utterance interpretation which Carston adopts (Relevance Theory), there is no role for the notion of Gricean ‘what is said’ or the ‘minimal’ proposition expressed, and that several pragmatic inferential processes make a great contribution to what is explicitly communicated by an utterance (explicature).

In Relevance Theory, the assumptions communicated by a speaker fall into two classes: explicature (what is explicitly communicated) and implicature (what is implicitly communicated). The contents of an explicature (the full proposition expressed by the utterance) come from two sources: decoded meanings and pragmatic inferences. It is assumed that four pragmatic processes are involved: saturation (including ‘reference assignment’), disambiguation, free enrichment, and ad-hoc concept construction. Consider the example of free enrichment in (7) with and. The pragmatically derived time-sequential (and then) meaning in (7) has been regarded by Griceans as a generalized conversational implicature which does not contribute to the truth conditional content. However, (8) shows that this is certainly part of the proposition expressed, otherwise (8) should lead to a contradiction. The relevance-theoretic notion of explicature correctly predicts this.

(7) The old king has died of a heart attack and a republic has been declared.
(8) If the old king has died of a heart attack and a republic has been declared, Tom will be happy, but if a republic has been declared and the old king has died of a heart attack, Tom will be unhappy.

Based on a wide range of data, Carston concludes that the Gricean notion ‘what is said’ is more than the decoded linguistic meaning and it is less than a level to which a truth-conditional semantics can be applied, and so that it does not define any representational level.
Chapter 3 surveys existing accounts of the semantics and pragmatics of and-conjunction, and explicates a basic cognitive function through a comparative study of utterances with and-conjunction and juxtaposed sentences without it. The point is that the human mind is constantly looking for and assuming causal relations among the states of affairs it perceives and conceives, and that a fundamental organizing principle of our cognitive makeup requires that our representations of individual states of affairs be embedded in a mesh of causal relations with other representations. In this relation, the difference in the interpretations of (9a) and (9b) can be explained. (9a) allows the interpretation that the second clause gives a reason for the first, but (9b) does not.

(9) a. Max didn’t go to school; he got sick.
    b. ≠ Max didn’t go to school and he got sick.

The key to the difference between the sorts of relations that juxtaposed descriptions as in (9a), on the one hand, and conjunctions as in (9b), on the other, can communicate, was claimed to be that while the juxtaposed cases can function as distinct units and each processed individually for relevance, and-conjunction comprises a single processing unit and carries the presumption of relevance as a whole.

Chapter 4 deals with the cases which have been covered by the name of metalinguistic negation and proposes a new interesting viewpoint with the notion of metarepresentational negation. Carston’s account is twofold: (a) the essential property of metalinguistic negation is that (some, at least, of) the material falling within the scope of the negation operator is to be understood as echoically used, and (b) the negation operator not itself is univocal and comprises the standard descriptive truth-functional negation even in the so-called metalinguistic cases. I would like to examine her ideas briefly.

Let us start with the definition of negation in logic in (10)

(10) Negation is used in logic to form a compound sentence the truth value of which is the opposite of that of the simple sentence it operates on.

(Allwood et al. 1977:40).

Therefore, if (11a) is true, (11b) must be false, and vice versa. In natural languages, however, there are some cases, such as (12a-e), where the negation operator seems to negate non-truth-conditional aspects of the sentence which it operates on.

(11) a. It’s snowing.  b. It’s not snowing.  (Allwood et al. 1977:40)

(12) a. I didn’t manage to trap two mongeese — I managed to trap two mongooses.
    b. The king of France is not bald — there is no king of France.
Horn (1985, 1989, 2004) distinguishes two uses of negation: descriptive negation (DN) which negates the truth conditions of its corresponding affirmative as in (11) and metalinguistic negation (MN) which negates anything other than the truth conditions as in (12). He argues that negation is not semantically but pragmatically ambiguous.

These data appear to suggest that there is a divergence between the meaning of lexical items in natural languages and its logical counterpart, which is also true of other logical operators. In this context, it is well known that Grice argued in the 1967 William James lectures on Logic and Conversation that, semantically, natural language expressions not, and, or, if, all, some, and the do not diverge from their logical operator counterparts, any other interpretations following from facts about language use and constituting conversational implicatures.

Carston’s claim (a) that the essential property of metalinguistic negation is the metarepresentational character of the material in the scope of the negation operator, seems to be true of all the metalinguistic cases. However, her notion of metarepresentational negation is also applied to the cases where the target of negation is a propositional content (= truth conditional content), as long as the negated material has the metarepresentational character. It follows that, in Carston’s characterization, Horn’s descriptive negation (13a) and metalinguistic negation (13b) are both regarded as metarepresentational negation in the context (14), since both (14B1) and (14B2), as responses to a question, contain the metarepresentation of (14A).

(13)

a. We didn’t see the hippopotamuses — we saw the rhinoceroses.
b. We didn’t see the hippopotamuses — we saw the hippopotami.

(14) A: Did you see the hippopotamuses in the zoo?
B1: We didn’t see the hippopotamuses — we saw the rhinoceroses.
B2: We didn’t see the hippopotamuses — we saw the hippopotami.

This resulting wide coverage of Carston’s metarepresentational negation raises two questions: (i) are there any cases of negation which are not metarepresentational? and (ii) isn’t her univocal semantics of negation (truth functional operator) inconsistent with the original logical definition of negation?

As for (i), it is worth mentioning Givón’s observation of negation in general, that negatives are uttered in a context where corresponding affirmatives have already been discussed, or else where the speaker assumes the hearer’s belief in — and thus familiarity with — the corresponding affirmative (Givón 1978: 109).
This seems to be exactly Carston’s characterization of metarepresentational negation, if the holder of the belief is expanded to include other people than the hearer. It follows from this that all (at least most of) the negatives are the cases of metarepresentational negation.

As for (ii), note that the original definition in logic (10) itself includes the stipulation about what is negated: the truth conditional content of the sentence it operates on. In this sense, Horn’s distinction between DN and MN is loyal to the logical definition. If we understand the logical definition of negation correctly, it seems rather hard to keep Carston’s claim (ii) as it is. I agree with Carston that the semantics of negation in natural language is univocal. The contentious point is what the univocal meaning of negation is. I suggest the possibility of the departure from logic in stipulating the semantic meaning of negation in natural languages, though this line of thought deviates from Grice’s spirit.

The final chapter focuses on ad-hoc concept construction (processes of pragmatic narrowing and broadening of encoded lexical meaning), and argue that it is the norm in understanding utterances, so that the relation between sentence meanings and propositions explicitly communicated is frequently quite a distant one.

There is no doubt that ad-hoc concept construction plays an important role when we understand utterances. Consider (15).

(15) Kato (of O. J. Simpson): He was upset but he wasn’t upset. (p. 324)

This utterance looks contradictory on the surface, but, in the context of a witness being questioned about Simpson’s state of mind on the day when his wife was murdered, it was understood as communicating that he was in a certain kind of upset state of mind, but that he was not in another (more intense, perhaps murderous) mental state. The word upset was understood as expressing two different concepts of upsetness, at least one, but most likely both, involving a pragmatic strengthening of the more general lexical concept UPSET.

The controversial point about ad-hoc concepts is the analysis on metaphorical utterances. Metaphorical expressions are based on our cognition of similarity. We find similarity on a variety of levels of expressions (or world) from a word (or entity) level to a story (or event) level. The notion of ad-hoc concept seems to succeed in explaining word (entity) level metaphors but not sentence or story (event) level metaphors. Consider (16) for the former and (17)-(18) for the latter.

(16) A: Mary is a bulldozer.
   B: Yes, she is; I’d prefer not to have her on the committee. (p. 338)

(17) A: What kind of mood did you find the boss in?
   B: The lion roared.
(18) After marrying a sweet young woman, a 90-year-old geezer told his doctor that they were expecting a baby. "Let me tell you a story," said the doctor. "An absent-minded fellow went hunting, but instead of a gun, he picked up an umbrella. Suddenly a bear charged him. Pointing his umbrella at the bear, he shot and killed it on the spot." "Impossible!" the geezer exclaimed. "Somebody else must have shot that bear." "Exactly," replied the doctor.

(16A) can be explained as follows: in the process of arriving at the intended interpretation, a logical or defining feature [machinery] of the lexically encoded concept of bulldozer is dropped, that is, the concept of bulldozer is loosened or broadened. On the other hand, it is not clear how (17) and (18) are explained by the notion of ad-hoc concept, i.e., by narrowing or broadening of each single encoded concept.

3. Concluding Remarks

As is usual with excellent books, Carston's book leads us to think further deeply and raise a good many questions, some of which I mentioned in the preceding section, and I tried to answer one of them. I repeat that this book takes a resolutely cognitive viewpoint, sheds a new light on the semantics/pragmatics interaction, and succeeds in elucidating the roles of languages and inferences in communication. I strongly recommend this book not only to pragmatists, of course, but also to everyone who is interested in human communication.

References


Reviews


