

Meaning in a Theory of Pragmatics

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MEANING IN A THEORY OF PRAGMATICS¹

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0. Introduction

The main objective of this talk is to investigate the following question: Is there such a thing as a pragmatic theory of meaning? Or: What is the status of 'meaning' in a theory of pragmatics?

The question is eminently suitable in the context of a meeting held in honor of the contributions of Charles Fillmore, in particular if we think of his contributions to the study of deixis, presupposition, and frame semantics (e.g. Fillmore 1966, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1972, 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 1981). The 'Fillmorean approach' to meaning has always been one which we might be inclined to capture under a label introduced by Susan Bean in 1978, i.e. 'pragmatic semantics.' Relying on Peirce's threefold distinction between icons (representing their object by possessing an attribute similar to it), indexes (indicating an object by being existentially associated with it), and symbols (referring to objects on the basis of an arbitrary association established by convention), Bean -- while also recognizing that "Signs with a significant iconic component occur in all languages" (p. 2) -- proposes a basic distinction between symbolic meaning (defined as "a product of signs that are arbitrarily related to their objects and that therefore signify distinctive properties of the object class"; p. 3) and pragmatic or indexical meaning (described as "a product of signs existentially associated with their objects, which therefore signify an intrinsic connection to their objects (but nothing further about the properties of the objects themselves)"; p. 3). In the same breath, she suggests that there are certain linguistic elements, such as terms of address, which partake both in symbolic meaning (their being *about* aspects of the sociocultural world) and in pragmatic or indexical meaning (because of *their connection* to the social situation in which they occur).

When confronting such distinctions with the semantics to be found in Fillmore's work, our original question gives rise to numerous sub-questions. His work on deixis, obviously concerned with the indexicality of utterances, could be adduced in support of Bean's basic definition of pragmatic meaning. But does an aspect of meaning have to be indexical in order to be pragmatic? What about the suggestion of guilt implied by the choice of **to blame** for the description of a verbal act that could also have been described with **to accuse**? Is the anchoring (to use Östman's 1986 term) which this choice involves in relation to an intangible world of assumptions also to be interpreted as an indexing device of some sort? If so, the same could probably be said for the institutional frame carried along by **to buy** and **to sell**. A positive answer would raise questions about Östman's (1986) definition of pragmatics as the study of implicit meaning, which would cover the presuppositional information evoked by **to blame**, and the institutional information associated with **to buy** and **to sell**, but not the indexical meaning of explicitly deictic expressions. This makes me repeat the question as to whether indexicality, as such, should be at all a prerequisite to talk about pragmatic issues of meaning. To borrow one of Fillmore's (1975) examples, isn't there something fundamentally pragmatic, for instance, in the question whether a caterpillar is

privileged to **climb** down a flagpole -- even if we are not thinking about social forms of privilege here but just about conceptual constraints? And what about common distinctions between literal, metaphorical, and situational meaning? What is their role in relation to a theory of pragmatics?

I hope to shed some light—though not at all conclusive, given the inherent limitations of this presentation—on these issues by advocating what could be called 'a pragmatic return to meaning' (section 1), by outlining a basic framework for a general theory of pragmatics (section 2), by asking some further questions in relation to recent work on meaning interpretation (section 3), by trying to situate the corresponding answers in the proposed theory of pragmatics (section 4), and by briefly illustrating the issues (section 5)

1. The pragmatic return to meaning

The following observation (developed at length elsewhere, see Verschueren 1994) will serve as our starting point. The Gricean concept of non-natural meaning (Grice 1957, 1968) removed meaning, as it were, from language (which had been its proper locus in traditional semantics) and attached it to one specific ingredient of the speech event, viz. individual intentionality. Defining meaning, as Grice did, in terms of the speaker's intention in the making of an utterance to produce an effect in the hearer by means of the hearer's recognition of the intention to produce that effect, was one of the major impetuses for a field of linguistic pragmatics to develop. Recently, however, an intention-based view of meaning has been seriously challenged, in particular by confronting orthodox speech act theory (Searle 1969) with anthropological data which showed that intention is only one factor in the production of meaning and that under certain circumstances it may not be the most important one (see Rosaldo 1982, Du Bois 1987, Duranti 1988, Hill & Irvine (eds.) 1993).

Historically, the restriction of meaning to speaker's intentions is probably to be explained as an understandable and partly justifiable defensive reflex to safeguard linguistics against the risk of conceptual imprecision and methodological unruliness, which would almost necessarily be involved in any attempt to cope with a field of pragmatics in the broad sense delineated by Morris (1938) as the study of the relation of signs to interpreters, to be developed under an obligation to take into account "psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs" (p. 30).

Elsewhere (see Verschueren 1987, 1994) I have tried to demonstrate (i) that such a restriction did not really seem to help very much in terms of coherent theory formation in pragmatics; (ii) that it was probably a mistake to regard pragmatics as an additional component of a linguistic theory on a par with syntax and semantics and that it might be more useful to look at it as a specific perspective on language; (iii) that such a perspective would necessarily take us back to the broadest possible functional view of language incorporating cognitive, social, and cultural aspects of language use; and (iv) that, in terms of such a general functional perspective, pragmatics could provide for a full-fledged *return to meaning* which, unlike the more restrictive Gricean semantics and certainly unlike most types of pre-Gricean semantics (if we disregard for a moment the quite broad view taken by Ogden & Richards 1923, or by the likes of Sapir), does full justice to the central role of meaning in human reality in its full complexity.

Unfortunately, arguments for these positions cannot be repeated in the context of this paper. Let us therefore briefly introduce the basic ideas underlying

one possible theory of pragmatics of the type we have hinted at, in order to proceed from there towards further reformulations of the question of meaning in pragmatics.

2. A theory of pragmatics

At the most elementary level, using language involves constantly making linguistic choices of various kinds. Keeping in mind that what must concern us when adopting a functional perspective on language is a question such as "What does language do for human beings, or what do human beings do for themselves by means of using language?" at least three, hierarchically related, notions are needed to understand this 'making of choices'. First, **variability** is the property of language determining the range of possible choices. Second, there is **negotiability** involved, which implies that the choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed form-function relationships, but on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. Third, **adaptability** is the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable choices from the variable range of possibilities in such a way as to satisfy basic human communicative and/or expressive needs.

Using adaptability as the starting point, we can assign four clear tasks to pragmatic descriptions and explanations. First, **contextual objects of adaptability** have to be identified. These include all the ingredients of the communicative context which communicative choices have to be interadaptable with. Second, the processes in question have to be situated with reference to the different **structural layers of adaptability**. Since the making of communicative choices takes place at all possible levels of linguistic structure that involve variability of any kind, pragmatic phenomena can be related to any level of structure. Third, any pragmatic description or explanation must account for the **dynamics of adaptability** as manifested in the phenomenon under investigation, in other words the development of adaptation processes over time. Fourth, we have to take into consideration differences in the **degrees of salience of the adaptation processes**. Not all choices are made equally consciously or purposefully. Some are virtually automatic, others are highly motivated. They involve different ways of processing in the medium of adaptability, the human 'mind in society.'

These tasks for pragmatic investigations are not to be situated all on a par with each other. Their contributions are not only complementary, they have different functional loads to carry within the overall framework of the pragmatic perspective. First, a combination of *contextual objects* and *structural layers* of adaptability can be used to define the **locus** of adaptation phenomena, i.e. they describe the combination of linguistic and extra-linguistic coordinates in the communicative space of a speech event. Accounting for the *dynamics* of adaptability, taking into account the full impact of variability and negotiability, is no doubt the central task of most specific pragmatic investigations since it is essentially concerned with a definition of the **processes** of adaptation as such. Finally, an investigation of the *salience* of adaptation processes sheds light on aspects of their most fundamental **functioning** in the lives of human beings, i.e. on the many ways in which they relate to human reflexive awareness, which may be actualized to various degrees in different instances of use.

What does all this have to do with meaning? The superordinate concern which guides the study of pragmatic phenomena, with an identifiable locus, primarily as processes at various levels of salience, is simply to trace the dynamic

(and often interactive) construction of **meaning** in language use. We are inevitably concerned with what Bruner (1990) calls 'acts of meaning,' cognitively mediated, and performed in a social and cultural environment.

3. Eco'ed questions

It should be clear that if we assume that there is more to meaning than the speaker's intention, and if we are dealing with a dynamic process of meaning construction (often to be qualified as interactive), then *interpretation* should be as crucial to the overall process as *production*. Probably it is the inevitability of this conclusion that has kept many linguists interested in meaning from taking a straightforward pragmatic approach seriously. Indeed, isn't interpretation a process without limits? And if so, how can it seriously be accounted for with any degree of certainty?

These questions basically echo a debate in semiotics fuelled by Umberto Eco's *The limits of interpretation* (1990) and *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (1992).² Eco defines the infinite drift of deconstruction allowed by Derrida's followers as a perversion of the 'unlimited semiosis' recognized by Peirce. Though there are indeed endless possibilities of interpretation of a text, Eco argues that it can be demonstrated that some types of interpretation are misinterpretations or overinterpretations, the main empirical criterion being one of 'coherence.' In order to avoid going back to the original language user's individual intentions as a criterion, he introduces a distinction between the *intentio auctoris* (the pre-textual individual intentionality of the author), the *intentio operis* (the 'intention of the work' which cannot be reduced to the author's intention, but which nevertheless imposes its own constraints on interpretation), and the *intentio lectoris* (i.e. basically the reader's 'interpretation,' to be distinguished from whatever 'use' the reader wants to make of the work). The belief in unlimited semiosis is fundamentally a relativistic attitude. What Eco does is what should be done, i.e. placing relativity itself within the scope of the relativistic attitude.

It is only if Eco's general point is correct (which does not commit us to adherence to the details of, for instance, his threefold distinction), that we can sensibly follow a pragmatic approach to meaning of the kind hinted at, while believing that what we are doing is at all scientific. Fortunately, recent work on the notion of 'context' (Auer & di Luzio (eds.) 1992, Duranti & Goodwin (eds.) 1992) points in the same direction. Potentially, 'context' is as troublesome a notion as 'interpretation,' since it seems equally limitless. But just as interpretation can be restricted to what is justifiable on the basis of the empirical language data, context can be restricted to those empirically traceable aspects of a potentially boundless context which the language users make use of in the (again, often interactive) construction of context, which is a central aspect of the construction of meaning.

4. Meaning in a theory of pragmatics

In other words, a pragmatic return to meaning in its full human complexity makes it possible to ask *What is the meaning of expression X in context Y?* (in the sense of a communicative content that is interactively constructed) rather than to restrict pragmatic investigations to the Gricean question *What does the language user intend X to mean in context Y?* (where the only active input on the interpretation side is an assessment of speakers' intentions).

Our own research in the last few years (see especially Verschueren 1991 and Blommaert & Verschueren 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994 forthcoming a/b) induces us to push this position to its extreme. Whereas Eco's formulation focuses on the interplay between intention, the linguistic form, and interpretation, where both the pre-textual intention and the recipient's interpretation involve conscious mental states and processes, we have evidence for the following assumption: *not only does the reader/listener/interlocutor play an important role in the construction of the meaning of a form of language use (within certain limits inherent in the discourse itself), but linguistic form may even come to carry meaning (to be empirically found in the text or discourse in the sense that it can be shown to have an influence on the further making of choices) which may neither have been intended pre-textually nor consciously interpreted by the 'audience,' and which is nevertheless part of the meaningful functioning of the instance of language use in question.*

The research in question involves a pragmatic analysis of tolerant discourse concerning the presence of (certain groups of) foreigners in Belgium. The analysis revealed, at the level of implicit types of meaning (to be found, for instance, in patterns of word choice, presupposition- and implication-carrying constructions, interaction patterns, and global meaning constructs such as structures of argumentation), conceptual patterns which demonstrably permeate rhetoric about interethnic conflicts while they deviate sharply from explicitly professed attitudes. The overall structure of the debate is now as in (1), where ER stands for the position taken by the extreme right, TM for what we call the 'tolerant majority,' and JB&JV for Blommaert and myself.

- (1)
- a. ER: Migrants should be sent back to their countries of origin.
 - b. TM: Migrants should integrate themselves into our society.
 - c. ER + TM: We respect other people's identity.
 - d. JB&JV: Neither ER nor TM accept fundamental forms of diversity.
 - e. TM: JB&JV just don't understand.

Sentence (1) d. summarizes the conclusion of a pragmatic analysis of a discourse corpus with a time depth of roughly three years, collected from mainstream sources (i.e. avoiding overt extremism in any direction), and consisting of news reports on the 'migrant problem,' moderate political policy statements, highly mediated social scientific research reports, and a government training program directed mainly at police officers. What we found was a conceptual, attitudinal, or ideological pattern of meaning construction, the one summarized in (1) d., with the following properties.

First, it is *not at all overtly represented in the linguistic form* of (1) a. and (1) b., nor in the texts which these lines summarize. Second, the discovered meaning *contradicts the explicit claims* to an attitude made by both ER and TM and which, certainly in the case of the 'tolerant majority,' we might want to accept as sincere expressions of meaning intentions. Third, (1) d. *does not form part of the interpretations* which the typical audience of the tolerant rhetoric would produce in its contribution to the meaning construction involved in the discourse in question.

The issue in the context of this paper is not whether our conclusions are methodologically sound (an extremely important issue which we have addressed at

length elsewhere; see Verschueren 1994), but simply what the example tells us about the status of meaning in a theory of pragmatics. It should be clear that the meaning we are talking about escapes from the realm of what can be studied in traditional forms of semantics focusing on semantic properties of linguistic expressions as such.

But are we then dealing with different types of meaning? In line with my argument that pragmatics does not have its own object, but that it is characterized by a perspective of its own, my answer would be negative.

Does this imply that there are no different types of meaning that can be distinguished? Again, my answer would be negative. There is no reason to dispute the possibility of distinguishing, for instance, between literal and metaphorical meaning, or between denotation and connotation, or between linguistic meaning and situational meaning, even if the distinctions are not always equally clear.

What pragmatics does is simply to apply its functional perspective (in the broadest sense involving cognitive, social, and cultural considerations) to any one of the different types of meaning one might want to distinguish (just as it applies that perspective to the choices made at any structural level of language as well). Assuming that a complete account of meaning would always have to involve such a pragmatic perspective, semantics may then be regarded as the field of investigation restricting itself to more or less abstracted or idealized meaning phenomena. Ultimately, it is part of the logic of the position advocated here, that any search for a strict distinction between semantics and pragmatics is relatively futile.

5. On shelling, chance, and change

Let us briefly illustrate the kinds of meaning-related questions engendered by the pragmatic perspective, with reference to (2), which is a front-page headline from *The New York Times* of Tuesday, February 8th 1994.

(2) Shelling Gives Clinton Chance to Change

Before going into this example, it is good to remind ourselves that the very fact of adducing an illustration of this kind is a violation of the principles of the pragmatic perspective. We indulge in this practice, however, for the simple reason that within the scope of this presentation it is impossible to provide a serious pragmatic analysis, which could never draw conclusions about the meaning of a sentence such as (2) without, for instance, going through the details of the text it is part of. Therefore I will not have conclusions to present. I will simply be raising the types of questions one must inevitably face if one takes meaning seriously as the complex human phenomenon it is.

The locus of what we want to talk about, for the present purposes, is defined by the following coordinates: in terms of the layers of linguistic structure involved, we want to say something about the processes of lexical choice resulting in 'shelling,' 'chance,' and 'change'; in terms of contextual objects of adaptability, the phenomenon under consideration is to be situated in a general geopolitical context in which a war is being fought in the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia Hercegovina, and in which the Clinton Administration's policy has been to avoid direct American military involvement.

If we were to restrict ourselves to Bean's definition of pragmatic meaning, restricting its scope to indexical elements, not too much could be said about (2) beyond the mere observation that there are indeed a number of contextual objects of

adaptability which the sentence is indexically related to. In this case, however, the indexicality itself is less interesting than the vagueness with which it is presented. 'Shelling' of Sarajevo had been going on for more than a year. But in spite of its general formulation, it is not a year of shelling that the phrase refers to. Such an interpretation would be incompatible with the 'chance to change' which, under the general interpretation would have been there for over a year as well, so that it would hardly be newsworthy. The 'shelling' in question is both textually and contextually narrowed down to one specific incidence of shelling which killed 68 people and wounded more than 200 in Sarajevo's central marketplace on Saturday February 5th. So there is no problem of ambiguity associated with the vagueness.

Yet, there is something intriguing about the formulation. Clearly it is not the *act of shelling*, on this particular occasion, that gives Clinton a chance to change (because the same kinds of acts had taken place many many times before), but rather the *result*: the many dead and wounded, the massacre. So, why did this headline not describe the result rather than the act? The reason seems to be that the meaning of 'give a chance' is too much associated with positive overtones for it to be combineable with anything resembling a massacre. The expectation pattern for

(3)

(3) X gives Y a chance to do Z

contains positive elements primarily in slot Z, but by extension also in X. Given the topic, the way in which the pattern is used would completely break the expectations if slot X would be filled with an explicit mention of what it stands for. However dubious the nature of shelling may be, in this case the word manages to serve as a euphemism.

But there is more. Slot Z is filled by 'change,' which in combination with 'give a chance to' sounds quite appealing in a society which values mobility and dynamism. But what does the 'change' mean? A cynical reading of (2) could be (4):

(4) The massacre gives Clinton a chance to go to war

We can call this reading cynical because it would imply that going to war, in opposition to abstaining from military involvement, is something Clinton would like to do. And if that would be the case, the massacre would get elevated to a stroke of luck because it provides him with the opportunity to do what he would like to do. But to avoid such morbid implications, the substitution in slot X of a description of the result of shelling with the term for the more neutral act of shelling, is paralleled in Z by the replacement of an action to be undertaken with a very general 'change.' Note that such a strategy only works for the author or editor of a report, and that it would not really help very much if Clinton himself were to say (5)

(5) That shelling gives me a chance to change

which he fortunately never did—one would hope.

Once it becomes clear that the 'change' in question does not so much pertain to the bringing about of changes in the state of affairs which led to the massacre, but merely to a 'change of policy,' it becomes impossible to avoid the issue of what the major concerns are that are betrayed by the phrasing: given the focus on improved chances for Clinton, the main preoccupation does not seem to be an

external change directly affecting Bosnia, but more an internal change taking place in Clinton and resulting in a different official stance and hence either in a different personal image, or a strengthening of American leadership in relation to the crisis at hand, or any combination of these. In that sense, there is real 'chance' involved, literally to be interpreted as good luck, since a policy change might be more detrimental than beneficial to the public image if it were not to be spurred by an incident which attracted enough public attention, and in this case outrage.

The processes of meaning construction involved can be ascertained on the basis of linguistically observable coherence and recurrence in the discourse under investigation, where both explicit and implicit movements have to be carefully monitored. To give a little taste of how the questions we raised can be shown to be relevant in this respect, let us also quote the subtitle of the same article:

(6) Graphic Bosnia Images Prompt Policy Debate

Unfortunately, in the context of this paper we cannot even begin to scrutinize the further implications of this phrase (let alone of the rest of the text), and the way in which they hang together with those we suspect to be relevant for (2).

6. Conclusion

The main point of this paper is that a pragmatic approach to meaning, while dealing with observable phenomena with a clear locus (such as word choice), must address wide-ranging issues involving cognitive phenomena (such as patterns of expectations) as well as social and cultural determinants (to the point where even geopolitics gets involved).

In a pragmatic analysis of the meaning of linguistic expressions such as (2), the question of the author's intentions plays only one of many roles, dominating only where clearly conscious strategies can be detected, and many of the processes in question take place at such a low level of awareness that they cannot be expected to enter the reader's conscious interpretation. Nevertheless they can play a crucial role in the societal and interactive construction of meaning. On the societal level, this leads us directly into the study of ideological processes, for which a systematic pragmatic methodology is well suited.

I must apologize for the fact that some of the examples briefly adduced to illustrate the status of meaning in a pragmatic theory or what a pragmatic study of meaning looks like, have not been very cheerful. This being the final lecture, this conference might thus end in a more serious note than is really necessary. But again Fillmore is to blame. He also used to teach a course on language and social institutions, the implicit—if not explicit—message of which was that linguists have a social responsibility. The details of how I interpret that message cannot be fully spelled out here. Let me just end by saying that if we have or can develop tools for the analysis of socially and politically relevant processes of meaning construction, we must use them.

Notes

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²Eco 1990 also contains a reprinted version of an older article (Eco 1987) in which a position is taken very similar to my own in connection with the status of pragmatics as an enterprise characterized by a specific perspective rather than a separable domain: "[...] pragmatics cannot be a discipline with its proper object as distinguished from those of semantics and syntactics" (1990: 205).

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