

How Free is Free Enrichment?

In this paper, my aim is that of questioning the role of inference in the interpretation of utterances of certain semantically under-determined sentences, such as “It’s raining”, “Jill is ready”, “The leaves are green” etc. Proponents of Truth-conditional Pragmatics characteristically hold that so-called processes of free enrichment rely on non-demonstrative, pragmatic *inferences*. I shall argue that utterance interpretation involves less inference and more pre-determined constraints than expected, in that it often happens to be guided by *conceptual constraints*, i.e. patterns of correct uses for concepts. On the basis of the notion of conceptual constraints, I shall outline a position of how utterance-content is determined which is intermediate between the purely pragmatic, inferential account of Truth-conditional Pragmatists (Carston, Recanati, Sperber&Wilson) and the purely syntactic account of hidden-indexical theorists (Stanley, Szabò, Rothschild&Segal).

1. Under-determined sentences and free pragmatic processes

Proponents of so-called Truth-Conditional Pragmatics (Carston, Recanati, Sperber&Wilson) have it that the interpretation of semantically under-determined sentences, like “It’s raining” and “Jill is ready”, involves pragmatic processes described as *enriching* or *completing* the content of these sentences, in such a way that they express a truth-evaluable proposition.

Processes of enrichment are characteristically accomplished: (a) *inferentially*, i.e. through a piece of reasoning, that starts from considerations concerning what the speaker has literally said and, with the help of pragmatic principles and maxims (as e.g. the principle of optimal relevance, or the conversational maxims spelled out by Grice) works out the content that the speaker is to be taken to express in context; (b) *in particular contexts*, i.e. with the help of the clues and elements taken from the very (broad) context in which the conversation is taking place: for example, salient objects, persons, presuppositions, standards of precision. The upshot of these pragmatic processes is what Carston calls an *explicature*, i.e. the content that the sentence expresses in that very context, given those particular communicative intentions from the part of the speaker, etc.

The (non-demonstrative) inferences through which the hearer arrives at the explicature could not get started if no particular context was accessible to the hearer. So a successful interpretation of an utterance of a semantically under-determined sentence needs to take place in a particular context. This implies that, if a particular context is not available, there is no hope for a hearer to successfully interpret an utterance. But is this true? Is utterance interpretation really impossible in absence of an available, particular context?

2. Intuitive Comprehension and Conceptual Constraints

There is certainly a sense of comprehension according to which we understand an utterance of “It’s raining” even if we don’t know which particular location the speaker is talking about. I shall call this kind of comprehension *intuitive comprehension*. Having an intuitive comprehension of an occurrence of “It’s raining” means that, upon hearing an utterance of this sentence, we know that any utterance of such sentence is true in any context iff it’s raining somewhere or other. Similarly, there is a sense of comprehension in which we perfectly understand an utterance of “Jill is ready” even if we don’t know which particular activity is under discussion. Our intuitive understanding consists in the fact that, upon hearing an utterance of “Jill is ready”, we thereby know that any utterance of this sentence is true in any context iff Jill is ready for something. In general, I shall say that intuitive comprehension is grasp of the truth-conditions that any arbitrary utterance of a (semantically under-determined) sentence has in any arbitrary context.

In virtue of what do we have intuitive comprehension? My contention is that intuitive comprehension is a manifestation of our *conceptual competences*. Conceptual competences are sets of dispositions to use certain concepts, such as the concept of *raining* and the concept of *readiness*. Let us make an example. It’s a conceptual truth that every episode of rain-falling takes place at a certain location; this makes it that correct uses of the concept of *raining* require specification (in some *loose* sense of “specification”) of a location. Now using expressions like “It’s raining” is certainly a way of using the concept of

raining; correctly employing the concept in this case implies uttering a sentence whose truth-conditions specify a location for the rain. If the location were already linguistically articulated (as in “It’s raining in Paris” or “It’s raining here”), the correct use of the concept of *raining* would be manifest; but in those cases in which the location is not articulated, the constraint on correct uses of the concept triggers the need for location-specification. Such a specification could be accomplished, at the truth-conditional level, by either *making reference* to a particular place or by *quantifying* onto places. Thus the hearer of an utterance of a semantically under-determined sentence like “It’s raining” may be guided by conceptual constraints in reconstructing the content and truth-conditions of an utterance of this sentence – of course if she is competent enough with the concept of *raining*.

3. Not-so-free Enrichment

Conceptual constraints thus guide processes of content retrieval for semantically under-determined sentences like “It’s raining”. If this is so, then what of the pragmatic inferences envisaged by Truth-conditional Pragmatists? If conceptual constraints really play this guideline- role, then the role of inferences is not as central as proponents of Truth-conditional Pragmatics want it (at least with respect to the sentences we are currently focussing on). In other words, with respect to the cases under examination, free enrichment turns out as being *more constrained than expected*, in that there are precise conceptual constraints that hearers need to follow in order to figure out the content of (certain) utterances. These constraints leave little room for pragmatic inferences taking into account speaker’s intentions and conversational maxims, in that they force the hearer to follow a rather “mechanical” procedure in order to work out the content of utterances.

Pragmatic inference could indeed have a role at some different stage, e.g. at the stage of fixing references. For example the conceptual constraint to the effect that rain has to fall somewhere may require the hearer to engage in some pragmatic reasoning as to reference to which location would make the speaker’s contribution optimally relevant or cooperative. However, this is not particularly exciting, in that it may be argued that pragmatic principles help reference fixing even in standard cases of indexicality, such as in fixing the reference for “this”, “that”, or even “here” and “now”. In other words, pragmatic inferential mechanisms may play a role, but this role is at the same time compatible with conceptual constraints and not particularly deviant from orthodox semantics.

Finally, the fact that there are conceptual constraints on the use of concepts such as *raining* or *readiness* doesn’t mean that the *predicates* “to rain” and “being ready” contain any extra slots in their logical form, as for example Stanley, Stanley&Szabo and Rothschild&Segal posit. In other words, the existence of conceptual constraints doesn’t imply any commitment at the level of syntax as to the presence of aphonic elements such as extra argument places in deep structure (see Neale and Pupa&Troseth on this).

Conclusion

When dealing with semantically under-determined sentences like “It’s raining” and “Jill is ready”, what theorists are interested in is typically how speakers manage to communicate propositional, truth-evaluable contents notwithstanding the semantic defectiveness of these sentences. Truth-conditional pragmatics assigns a pivotal role to *free pragmatic processes*, which largely employ inferences in order to recover the content expressed by the speaker. I have tried to argue that, at least when dealing with examples along the lines of “It’s raining” and “Jill is ready”, the reconstruction of content depends less on inference and more on conceptual constraints on the correct use of concepts such as *raining* or *readiness*. In other words, “free enrichment” is not so “free”. Even though my account recognises that there is a level of “what is said” over and above sentence meaning, it however opposes Truth-conditional Pragmatics in that it doesn’t recognise that inference has such a central role in determining it. On the other hand, the presence of constraints at the conceptual level doesn’t imply that these constraints are represented also at a *syntactic* level: the account then sets itself apart from so-called Indexicalist theories in that it completely avoids commitments at the level of syntax.