

Introduction

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The title we have chosen for this issue of the Italian Journal of Linguistics is meant to cover a wide range of problems which may be good candidates for treatment in terms of Lexical Pragmatics. At present, the label is mostly used to identify an area of study which is somewhat limited in nature, especially when one considers that its aim is to offer a systematic and explanatory account of what is left out by lexical semantics. The relatively few notions currently addressed within the restricted view of Lexical Pragmatics include pragmatic compositionality, pragmatic anomaly, lexical blocking, and systematic polysemy (Blutner 1997, 1999).

We would like to widen such a view: if Lexical Pragmatics is to be firmly established as a field of research, then the enterprise cannot but start from the acknowledgement that pragmatics permeates the lexicon in all its aspects – structural, textual, diachronic, developmental, typological, and computational, to mention but a few. It would probably take the space of another special issue to even rapidly mention the relevant literature already existing in each of these fields, and indeed a useful operating definition of Lexical Pragmatics seems to invite a narrowing of the scope, along the lines suggested by Wilson in this issue, to the investigation of “the processes by which linguistically-specified (‘literal’) word meanings are modified in use”.

Of course, much of the success of the scientific enterprise depends on both the stand we take as to the status of literal meanings, and the notion of pragmatics that we adopt.

The papers collected in this volume constitute a wide-ranging set of articles inter-related by virtue of their being pragmatically based in an unrestricted sense: that is, either in terms of a specific, theoretically motivated perspective of data observation and analysis, or in terms of a shared paradigm of assumptions, (including the role of context, the structure of discourse, the role of encyclopaedic knowledge, concept constitution, the principles that guide inferential processes, and the relations between speech acts and linguistic structures).

When dealing with the lexicon from a pragmatic perspective, the relationship between this perspective and lexical semantics must be a primary concern.

The question may be considered in many different ways:

1. What areas are left to lexical pragmatics once lexical semantics has done its job?
2. How can the empirical domains of lexico-semantic theories and lexico-pragmatic perspectives be kept distinct?
3. Which aspects of the lexicon can best be explained semantically and which are best explained pragmatically?
4. Which representation of a lexical item better accounts for sense extensions and referential transfer phenomena?
5. How should the relationship between concepts and linguistic meanings be represented in order to explain the fact that concepts communicated by using words may differ from the concepts encoded?
6. How can encyclopaedic knowledge be made to become the substance of word meanings in a systematic manner?

Other questions could be added, of course, but even considering those mentioned above, different theoretical attitudes can be identified: questions (1) through (3) clearly presuppose a separatist attitude; (4) focuses on contextual variations as a problem for lexical representations; (5) and (6) open up a cognitive perspective which undermines a rigid separation of domains.

The papers collected here highlight a subset of the problems which underlie the questions formulated above, and they do so through the selection of different domains of investigation. In what follows I will try to point out the shared problems while preserving individual differences.

1. A mystery and a paradox

Most of the time conversations run smooth, some adjustments compensating for possible misunderstandings; in non-pathological conditions, text comprehension is normally unimpaired, and overall people do succeed in putting themselves across with words. Languages seem, in other words, efficient tools for communicating, and human beings appear to be equipped with efficient processing devices for dealing with the complexities of turning thoughts into the right words and viceversa.

Since we have no direct access to the processes, we can only make hypotheses on the basis of observation. The study of the ways

words convey meanings offers an intriguing paradox which, although apparently complicating, actually sheds some light upon the directions of research for disentangling the complexities: communication is made possible by the stability of form-meaning connections and proceeds from the instability of the connections themselves.

Without some degree of stability there could be no guarantee of mutual understanding, and without some degree of instability there could be no way of adapting forms to meaning variations. Lack of stability and lack of instability would equally bring about communication failure: if each single speaker used words with everchanging meanings, it would be impossible to share potentially common ideas, feelings and experiences; similarly, if each single speaker used words with exactly one and the same meaning on every different occasion, it would be impossible to express individual thoughts, if not at the cost of either inventing new forms for any new fine shade of meaning or of failing to talk about the infinite variability of reality and unreality .

Both lexical stability and instability are instrumental to the principle of economy in verbal communication. Stability, however, seems to be serving the purpose of cognitive economy, whereas instability seems to be functional to the economy of the language system: the more stable the connection between form and meaning, the less the effort required to identify what is being talked about; the less stable the connection, the wider the range of variability which one and the same form can be used to cover, but the greater the role of the context and, consequently, the cognitive load of the mind, in computing what the object of communication is.

Lexical systems are based upon a reasonable balance between the two extremes: neither absolute stability nor complete instability are tolerated in natural languages (indeed, it is the dynamic balance between stability and instability that makes the difference between natural languages and 'mere' codes).

2. A few illusions

I see this basic tension between apparent stability and relative instability, upon which both conventionality and creativity are based, as one of the motivating factors for lexico-pragmatic research and at the same time as an argument against the possibility of a lexical semantics without pragmatics. Far from being the elements of disturbance in what would look like a neat and clean situation *in vitro*, contexts trigger the search for those lexical meanings which can only be

assessed inferentially. If contexts are abstracted away, then a number of illusions may arise, among which:

1. the primacy of literal meanings. Absolute stability is what gives the illusion of the primacy of literal meanings, but literal meanings are in verbal communication like shots in a film: they are static entities containing material – possibly portions of an encyclopaedia – for potential use in so many potential contexts that it would be hard to attach to them any significance beyond that of “a clue to the speaker’s meaning which is not decoded but non-demonstratively inferred” (Wilson, this volume);
2. the non existence of literal meanings. Absolute instability may give the illusion that radical creativity is the main feature of verbal communication, that there is no material at all in a word taken in isolation – which would amount to saying that natural languages may consist of empty forms which are filled in with any kind of information in verbal interactions – an assumption that would deprive natural languages of any social role at all. The problem with literal meanings is not whether they do or do not exist: it is how they are themselves construed, when they come into existence, what they are made of, and how they are made to play a role in contexts.

As Violi underlines, word meanings exist only in texts and contexts. Far from being endlessly variable, however, (con)texts do exhibit degrees of systematicity (which text typologies try to pinpoint), attracting the material upon which concepts are shaped into patterns of regularity (frames, scripts, and mental spaces represent different theoretical modes of accounting for such a regularity).

The problem, as Violi rightly points out, is that the (con)textual realizations of conceptual meanings do not follow a linear logic. Quite to the contrary: it is my personal belief (see Bertuccelli Papi 2003) that they follow the logic of complexity as a qualitative feature of dynamic systems: natural languages in their empirically observable status, namely texts and discourse, are structured wholes made up of interacting systems from which meanings “emerge” in recurrent configurations, with some degree of statistically relevant stability (which is what regularity amounts to), in order to prevent communicative chaos.

If looked at from this perspective, then the basis for the systematicity of semantic systems should be sought neither in the inner properties of lexical items nor in the configuration patterns of concepts, since both are the results of temporally and spatially bound

cultural choices (Eco 1997): rather, it should be sought in the interplay of principles, parameters and operations that enable the acquisition and management of encyclopaedic knowledge in concept formation and human reasoning. In this sense, the investigation of lexical-pragmatic processes turns out to be pivotal.

3. *The papers in this issue*

The basic questions addressed by Wilson's paper are: which factors are they triggered by, what directions do they take, when do they stop. The answers proposed are that they are triggered by the search for Relevance, guided by the principle of least effort, and stopped when the expectations of Relevance raised by the utterance are satisfied. Thus, narrowing, approximation, and metaphorical extension, which have often been treated as distinct pragmatic processes and studied in isolation from each other, are shown to be "the outcomes of a single pragmatic process which fine-tunes the interpretation of virtually every word".

F. Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña's paper insists upon the pervasiveness of inferential operations, as long stated within Relevance Theory, and explores the connections between pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, pointing to pragmatic inferencing as the area of enquiry upon which the interests of the two research fields may converge. Specifically, it is suggested that metaphoric and metonymic operations can be interpreted in terms of the implicature-explicature generation mechanisms: the activity of such mechanisms is further shown to be related to a set of cognitive operations which are previous to the creation of a conceptual structure, thus providing arguments in favour of the Combined Input Hypothesis put forward in Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña (2002).

The interface between semantic, pragmatic and cognitive processes is also a major point in Moeschler's paper, which explores the complex notion of causality and the role it plays in discourse argumentation and explanation. The analysis concentrates on the contribution of connectives such as French *parce que* to the linguistic expression of causal meaning and to the logical structure of causal reasoning. A general semantico-pragmatic model of causal and inferential uses of *parce que* is proposed, which provides an account of why *parce que* interpretation often yields explanation and argumentation: the explanation relationship follows from the discourse setting of causality within a causal chain; the connections of argumentation,

which consists in connecting two causal chains, with refutation on one side and manipulation on the other, are accounted for as, respectively, refusal and obligation to connect causal chains.

An interesting point emerges from Lehrer's paper. The principle of least effort seems to be contradicted by the puzzling results of experiments performed to test the hypothesis that blends represent economic means of expression. Contrary to expectations, the present-day spreading of neologistic blends cannot be motivated in terms of formal economy: far from speeding up the processing time, blends appear to require more processing effort, being, at least initially, less transparent than the juxtaposition of the two unclipped forms involved in their formation. If speakers continue not only to tolerate them but also to produce them, then this means that some benefits can be gathered in other areas to compensate for the costs of processing, and in fact the benefits turn out to be pragmatically motivated: the extra-effort is invited as a means to call attention to the message via its "marked" form (the term "marked" is not Lehrer's: it is used here in the sense of Merlini 2003 and Bertuccelli 2000, 2003). The pragmatic perspective, here represented by perlocutionary intents within a speech-act-theory frame of interpretation, offers an explanation to an otherwise mysterious finding.

Complex word meaning in the Mandarin Chinese lexicon is the subject of Packard's study. Starting from the observation that morphologically complex words exhibit various degrees of opacity (or transparency) due to different formation processes, and consequently require pragmatic inferencing to single out their actual meaning, Packard argues that pragmatic conditions on complex word interpretation actually hold only for novel lexical items: once they have become stable in the lexicon, then no pragmatic procedures are further allowed to access their internal constituents. Instead, as the analysis of Mandarin complex words formed with the *-zhe* suffix demonstrate, they become opaque to pragmatic enrichment effects. With this, we have come full circle to one of the central problems touched upon by all the papers - namely, context.

Violi claims that the shift and essentially indefinable nature of context makes it the "black hole" of lexical semantics, whereas it is one of Sperber and Wilson's most widely recognized insights that contexts, to be kept distinct from cognitive environments, are constructed (see Duranti and Goodwin 1992 for a review, and Sbisà 2002 for independent arguments in favour of speech act contexts being viewed as constructed rather than given, limited rather than extensible, and objective as opposed to cognitive). Despite some differences, it is by

now widely recognized that contexts are not containers filled with different substances capable of transforming putatively pre-defined meanings like objects in a chemical reaction: they are pieces of knowledge, and in their being pieces of knowledge they are liable to be shaped into configuration patterns which are subject to both variability and regularity. In this sense, as Violi puts it, words can be indexed to contexts, create contexts, or inscribe contexts. But in conceiving of contexts as pieces of knowledge, we are faced with a further set of problems: which organization of knowledge into conceptual systems best accounts for systematicity in contextually based lexical interpretation, how are the biological constraints on its architecture related to our way of dealing with lexical meanings, what processes are responsible for the selection and retrieval of the material upon which inferences can operate – the whole question of the relationship between concepts and meaning (see Hampton and Moss 2003) comes with force to the foreground as a privileged area of research of lexical pragmatics.

In this short introduction, I have wished to mention a number of closely interconnected problems, some of which are discussed in this volume, and some of which are only alluded to – such as the lexical modulation of speech acts (Caffi 1999, Sbisà 2002), generalized implicatures and lexical inferences (Carston 2002, Levinson 2003), word meaning and syntax (Lascarides and Copestake 1998), – as relevant topics in a theoretical debate which has important repercussions in such domains as lexicography, computational linguistics, neurolinguistics, and translation studies (see, among others, Nuccorini 2001, Paradis 1998, Stemmer 1999, Weigand 1998, Ullrych and Bollettieri Bosinelli 1999).

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