

On Intentionality and Figurative Language Comprehension



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The problem of intentionality has, more or less overtly, been an important focus of scientific debates from the earliest times. From the philosophical point of view, the principal problem has been to give an account of “aboutness”. In other words, intentionality can be defined as the power of mind to be about the world and is strongly related to our capacity to represent the world in thought and in language. Since the world is represented in many ways (in thought, perception and language), the problem of intentionality can be thought of as a cluster of problems lying at the interface between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language. In view of this, the issues within the

scope of intentionality help to clarify how language relates to the world and to the mind of the speaker and the interpreter. Since intentionality is inseparable from our perception, cognizance and representation of the world around us, it is considered to be an effective tool when applied to the study of meaning from the pragmatic viewpoint. The aim of this paper is to disclose some aspects of intentionality which are closely related to meaning.

Being of medieval scholastic origin, the word ‘intentionality’ itself was rehabilitated by Franz Brentano towards the end of the 19th century. ‘Intentionality’ is also a philosophical term. It derives from the Latin word ‘intentio’ which, in turn, derives from the word ‘intendere’ meaning ‘directed towards some goal or thing’. Since any utterance presupposes the existence of certain pragmatic goal in the speaker’s mind, communication is viewed as a range of activities the intentionality of which determines the choice of language items which we employ. Language is universal, the conditions of its use are innumerable and, in fact, the meaning of a linguistic expression is revealed in its use. In this view, speech acts are of particular interest as the performance of a speech act, in particular that of an illocutionary act, is a matter of having a certain communicative intention in uttering certain words.¹ Indeed, speech is an extremely complex and ever-shifting network of adjustments tending towards the desired end of communication. When a speaker utters ‘*My wife’s cooking is a disaster*’, the speaker’s intention is to convey dislike of his wife’s cooking. However, the metaphor itself does not contain the propositional expression of dislike: it arises from the pragmatic analysis of the utterance as a speech act. Language users routinely face the problem of making sense out of language. Speakers are supposed to design utterances that listeners can understand and listeners, in their turn, are expected to interpret utterances the way they are intended. As J.Verschueren (1999) states, the interpretation of utterances is fully dependent on speaker’s intentions. Thus, successful communication (or the successful

transfer of meanings) can be seen as a process by which speakers attain mutual knowledge of communicative intention with the help of (intentionally applied) principles of cooperation. It follows that an act of communication succeeds if it is taken as intended. For instance, an apology is the act of expressing regret for something one did that might have harmed or at least bothered the hearer and it succeeds if it is taken as intended.

One of the clearest expressions of the dependence of meaning on speaker intentions is to be found in indirect and nonliteral acts. In both cases the intended meaning is not compatible with the literal meanings of the words and sentences that are used, i.e. there is no direct coincidence between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. Despite this shared general feature they are distinct and should not be confused. In nonliteral utterances, we do not mean what our words mean but something else instead. In other words, the illocutionary act that is performed cannot be predicted just from the meanings of the words being used (e.g. ironies, metaphors and other figurative uses of language are common cases of nonliteral acts). In the case of indirect speech acts one intends to convey more than is said. When an illocutionary act is performed indirectly, it is performed by way of performing some other one directly, for instance, making a request by way of asking a question.

e.g. Will you, please, tell her that a relative is anxious to see her?

Here, the speaker's statement has the literal force of a question, it has also, in addition, the indirect force of a request and this interpretation is strongly reinforced by the presence of the word 'please'. If, for example, someone replies to an invitation 'Will you dine with me tonight?' by saying 'I have an appointment I simply might keep' then that reply will be taken as a rejection of invitation. It can be taken to imply that the hearer does not have time to dine with the speaker because he is to meet someone. Thus, the meaning of an utterance necessarily involves the speaker's communicative intention. For instance, the utterance 'Tom, wouldn't it be more comfortable to mix with friends of your age?' can be interpreted as a real question asking for information, a piece of advice, or even reproach. The speaker's communicative intention together with other illocutionary force indicating devices helps to determine the type of the illocutionary force the utterance is associated with. It should be mentioned that the indirect force is implied only on the basis of the literal force. Occasionally, utterances are both nonliteral and indirect. For example, one might utter 'I love the sound of your voice' to tell someone nonliterally (ironically) that she cannot stand the sound of his voice and thereby ask him indirectly to stop singing. How do people understand utterances that are intended figuratively, when the speaker's intent is quite different from the meanings of his words? As J. Austin (1962) states, there exists a pragmatic imperative then, that in order to capture the richness of figurative utterances (metaphors, ironies, etc.), they need to be viewed as full speech acts. From this perspective they are uttered by the speaker with a specific communicative intent and subsequently interpreted by the listener. Our task is to observe and reveal the pragmatic contract between the speaker and the listener in the transfer of non-literal information between both. There exist different views on interpretation of figurative utterances. Approaches diverge with regard to the complex

correlation between literal and nonliteral meanings: which of them is activated initially in the course of comprehension? According to direct access view, listeners can comprehend the intended meaning of many nonliteral utterances directly, i.e., in a rich and supportive context figurative utterances would be processed initially only figuratively.² In contrast, the standard pragmatic model assumes the temporal priority of literal meanings (see Giora 2003). Thus, the figurative meaning in the utterance '*Children are precious gems*' is derived from the literal and can be inferred by discovering the nature of the substitution of the metaphorical for the literal. Ironies are interpreted on an exactly similar pattern. If one says '*What a lovely day for a picnic on a stormy day*' the listener would first compute the literal meaning of the statement, reject it as the intended meaning and replace it with an alternative, contextually appropriate ironic interpretation.³ The difference lies in the interplay between *sentence meaning* and *speaker meaning*: in metaphors we mean more than is said, while in ironic utterances we mean the opposite of what is said. Therefore, ironic utterances are more context dependent as contextually incompatible meanings need to be replaced by their opposite ones. The process of comprehension becomes complicated and requires more cognitive work on the part of the listener when the latter has to perceive the speaker's intention with regard to the metaphoric and ironic interpretations of one and the same utterance.

a. John and his friend were waiting in line at the supermarket checkout. The cashier was working very efficiently. About the cashier, John's friend said. "*Her mind is an active volcano.*"

b. John and his friend were waiting in line at the supermarket checkout. The cashier was having difficulty in counting change for the customer ahead of them in line. About the cashier, John's friend said. "*Her mind is an active volcano.*"

It is obvious that John's friend's intention is different in the italicized utterances in (a) and (b). The listener has to draw more complex inferences to work out the ironic interpretation in as it involves both understanding the sentence (a positive metaphor) and how it is being used to convey negative information. In contrast, comprehension of the metaphor involves only the first metaphoric process.

Thus, figurative language, such as verbal irony, metaphor and other implicit forms is an increasingly important subfield within the pragmatic study of language comprehension and use. Research shows that nonliteral language presents a relatively greater divergence between sentence meaning and speaker meaning and the process of its comprehension necessarily involves drawing particular inferences on the part of the listener to derive the speaker's intended meaning.

Notes:

1. Although the focus of speech act theory has been on utterances, the phrase 'speech act' should be taken as a generic term for any sort of language use. Speech acts fall under the broad category of intentional action, with which they share certain general features. An especially pertinent feature is that if one acts intentionally, he/she has a set of nested intentions.
2. It should be mentioned that not all nonliteral utterances are alike. Some of them are

more “nonliteral” than others. For instance, the process of comprehension of familiar or nonfamiliar metaphors vary, the latter involving longer and more complex processes of inference to arrive at a metaphorical interpretation.

3. The ability of irony to mock, attack and ridicule, provoking embarrassment, humiliation, even anger suggests that depending on the speaker’s intention irony may be used to achieve a complex set of social and communicative goals. Empirical research, in fact, shows that different forms of irony may work differently in emphasizing the contrast between expectations and reality.

References:

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ՀԱՂՈՐԴԱԿՑԱԿԱՆ ՄԻՏՈՒՄԸ ԵՎ ՊԱՏԿԵՐԱՎՈՐ ԼԵԶՎԻ ԸՆԿԱԼՄԱՆ ԱՌԱՆՁՆԱՀԱՏԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ

Հաղորդակցական միտումը, որը լեզվափիլիսոփայական հասկացություն է, հատկապես կարևորվում է գործաբանական վերլուծության տեսանկյունից: Սույն հոդվածում փորձ է արվում քննել հաղորդակցական միտման և պատկերավոր լեզվի ընկալման միջև եղած բարդ փոխհարաբերության խնդիրը: Ուշադրության կենտրոնում են փոխաբերությունը և հեզնանքը, որոնց ընկալման և մեկնաբանման գործում առանձնահատուկ դեր է խաղում խոսողի հաղորդակցական մտադրությունը: