



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Introduction

A burgeoning field of research: Humorous intent in interaction

Abstract

This introductory chapter sheds light on a number of issues pertinent to the study of humorous intent/intention in interaction. First of all, attention is paid to the notion of intention, as studied across disciplines, and the problems which it invites. Secondly, we revisit a number of recurrent topics in humour research (e.g. humour cues, the play frame, failed humour, as well as humour in scripted and filmed interactions) which are intimately connected with humorous intentions. Most of these issues are reflected in the particular contributions to this Special Issue, which serve as an eclectic representation of how humorous intention can be studied in the future.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Humour; Intention; Intent; Interaction

1. Introduction

For many years, humour research concentrated on finding the essence of humour and consequently focussed on incongruity, superiority and other factors to explain the emergence of humour. During this period, humorous intent/intention in the producer and its recognition in the receiver were largely taken for granted or altogether ignored. While this approach produced central theories of humour, a number of highly relevant aspects of humorous communication were to a considerable extent neglected, such as: What is humorous intent and how can it be signalled? How can humorous intent be recognised, and what exactly does “recognition” entail? Can humorous intent be claimed by the producer alone or is it always subject to negotiation in interaction? Who is responsible for success or failure and how does this impact discourse? Can there be humour without intent? How is humorous intent set off from non-humorous intent? What analytical tools are adequate for capturing humorous intent? These issues are in need of scholarly investigation.

In pragmatics, the question of intention and its reconstruction has traditionally played a central role, and other disciplines such as (developmental) psychology, philosophy of mind and neuroscience have also shown an interest in intention. Humour studies have benefitted considerably from these approaches, but the topic of *humorous intent/intention* is not yet a widely pursued strand of research.

This Special Issue reflects the current discussion of intent, intentions and intentionality, presenting its relevance to humour research. In the sections below, a number of the topics at stake are briefly presented.

2. Defining intent/intention

In the simple distinction between intentional vs. unintentional humour, researchers seem to rely on an everyday sense of *intention* (Malle, 2004). This is a useful empirical starting point, but it should not hide the fact that intention is a complex notion (for extensive summaries, see e.g. Haugh, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012; Haugh, 2013).

Gibbs (1999) points out that there are at least four ways in which scholars talk about intention, namely as personal plans which can be expressed by people themselves, as future courses of action attributed to others, as the objective of someone's course of action, and as the classification of an action in terms of an objective which it aims to accomplish.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.02.004>

0378-2166/© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Dynel, M., et al., A burgeoning field of research: Humorous intent in interaction. Journal of Pragmatics (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.02.004>

If we look at the role intention plays in planning and choosing a suitable course of action, intention can be understood as “an element ‘inside’ a person which motivates him/her to act in certain ways” (Nuyts, 2000: 1). Intention can then be seen as the first stage in devising a strategy and deciding what action to take, or, as Gibbs puts it, intentions in this sense are taken to be “private mental states that are formulated before the performance of behavioural acts” (Gibbs, 1999: 23).

However, intentions not only function as the instigators of people’s own actions, but they also play a role in making sense of other people’s behaviour. Intentions are then ascribed to other people in terms of what these people aim to achieve by a given utterance or action (Gibbs, 1999). Intentions in this sense must be reconstructed on the basis of the objectives which people (apparently) pursue by the actions that they take (Dennett, 1987). The link with apparent objectives also explains why actions themselves can be classified as intentional when they are seen as being done purposefully with a view to achieving certain aims (Gibbs, 1999). The connections of intentions to mental states, to the expression of mental states, to the ascription of mental states to others, and to the classification of actions performed on the basis of the assessment of people’s objectives suggest that the concept of intention is highly complex and far from clear-cut.

In pragmatics, these and other aspects of the nature of intentions as mental states driving people to take specific actions are important, but they can only be a part of the phenomena in the focus of pragmatic investigation. A fundamental issue is what exactly happens when people communicate, as well as what kinds of intentions are at stake and how they are exchanged, recognised, co-ordinated and/or negotiated.

A highly prominent approach has been to define intention technically from a philosophical-cognitive perspective (cf. Haugh, 2008a, 2009) inspired by Grice’s (1989) lectures. Many, though not all, Gricean and neo-Gricean studies present intention as a strictly philosophical notion (see Jaszczolt, 1999; Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012; Haugh, 2013). The notion of intention is also addressed by conversation analysts and discursive psychologists (e.g. Bilmes, 1986; Drew, 1995, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Edwards and Potter, 2005; Heritage, 1990; Hopper, 2005; Schegloff, 1996), who perceive intention as a *post facto* construct emergent through interaction. This is a complementary view to *a priori* intention, namely intention that exists before a person makes a verbal contribution (or performs a different action).

3. Methodological problems with studying intent

In trying to clarify the various positions on intention, Haugh (2008b) addresses a number of methodological problems indicating the ambiguous status of intention. Most of these issues are of immediate relevance to the workings of humorous intention in interactions.

One of the problems Haugh (2008b) lists is the temporal aspect, which is reflected in the differentiation between the above-mentioned *a priori* intentions (Gibbs, 1999) or future-directed intentions (Bratman, 1987), on the one hand, and intentions in action (Searle, 1983), on the other. Since interlocutors can negotiate intentions, the concept of *post facto* intentions as jointly negotiated by interactants seems a valid notion. As Edwards (2006: 44) notes, the speaker’s intention judged *post facto* is “generally open to formulation, denial, opposition, alternative description, or the partialling-out of intent with regard to specific, formulated components of actions.”

A related problem identified by Haugh (2008b) is that of ontological ambiguity. The ontological status of intention captures the tension between the speaker’s intention and the intention which the hearer attributes to the speaker (Mann, 2003; Stamp and Knapp, 1990; Haugh, 2008b). How a conversation unfolds is co-determined by the hearer’s uptake of the message (cf. Clark, 1996), which should (but need not) be compatible with the speaker’s intended meaning (cf. Gauker, 1994). For a communicative act to be successful from the speaker’s perspective, it is often seen as crucial that the speaker’s communicative intention be recognised by the hearer (Schiffer, 1972). Failure in this respect will result in misunderstanding or reorientation of the speaker’s intention (see Carassa and Colombetti, 2009). As Arundale (2008) points out, the underlying assumption seems to be that in an ideal situation, the speaker’s and the hearer’s mental states are identical. Yet this is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, the identity of intentions cannot be categorically established, and hearers’ inferences about speakers’ intentions are always somewhat speculative. Secondly, a question needs to be raised concerning the extent to which people really define success in communication as the identity between their intentions and other interactants’ inference of them. This may be likely as far as *post facto* intentions emerging in interaction are concerned, but it seems problematic for *a priori* intentions. Not all people want to share their private motives with others. Here, a gap may appear between communicated intention, on the one hand, and privately held intention, on the other. In line with this, Németh T. (2008) defines the concept of manipulative intent, which suggests that there are many cases in which people do not want the motives of their actions to be inferred “correctly” by hearers, i.e. in the same sense as the speaker experiences them. Manipulative intent is not necessarily reprehensible. People have a right to their private pursuits and to what extent manipulative intent is socially acceptable is a matter of morality and contextual factors.

Thirdly, Haugh (2008b) points to the problem of epistemological ambiguity, and thus the question whether hearers consciously ascribe intentions to speakers (Haugh, 2008b). Such a claim is seen as untenable by some researchers

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7297914>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7297914>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)