Reassessing the conceptual–procedural distinction

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to reassess the conceptual–procedural distinction as drawn in relevance theory in the light of almost thirty years of research. In Section 1, I make some comparisons between approaches to semantics based on a conceptual–procedural distinction and those based on a distinction between truth conditions and conditions for appropriate use. In Section 2, I present a brief history of the conceptual–procedural distinction as drawn in relevance theory. In Section 3, I consider the nature of procedural encoding and discuss whether it is best seen as semantic or pragmatic. In Section 4, I outline some parallels and differences between procedural and use-conditional accounts of interjections. In Section 5, I discuss the implications of the conceptual–procedural distinction for lexical pragmatics and consider some recent proposals about how it might be extended. In Section 6, I reassess the conceptual–procedural distinction in the light of current evolutionary approaches to cognition and point out some future directions for research.
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1. Introduction

Diane Blakemore began her book *Semantic Constraints on Relevance* (1987) by arguing that Gazdar's famous slogan "Pragmatics = Meaning minus Truth Conditions" (Gazdar, 1979:2) lays an inadequate foundation for a cognitively plausible pragmatic theory. Her main concern was a class of inferential connectives such as *but, so* and *moreover* which are widely seen as non-truth-conditional: she argued that these should fall within the scope of linguistic semantics rather than pragmatics, since their meanings are linguistically encoded rather than pragmatically inferred. Blakemore's analyses of these connectives differed substantially from those traditionally offered for regular 'content' words like *scarlet, hop* and *giraffe*. Rather than encoding concepts, constituents of a conceptual representation system or 'language of thought', she argued that the information they encode is essentially procedural: they indicate the inferential processes addressees are expected to use in identifying the speaker's meaning (i.e. the array of propositions that the speaker overtly intended to make manifest or more manifest, cf. Sperber and Wilson, 2015). In her view, the differences between these connectives and regular 'content' words are enough to suggest a "non-unitary theory of linguistic semantics":

> On the one hand, there is the essentially *conceptual* theory that deals with the way in which elements of linguistic structure map onto concepts – that is, onto constituents of propositional representations that undergo computations. On the other, there is the essentially *procedural* theory that deals with the way in which elements

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of linguistic structure map directly onto computations themselves – that is, onto mental processes. (Blakemore, 1987:144)

Blakemore's procedural approach has since been extended to a variety of further expressions which present problems for the traditional view that the meaning of a word is the concept it encodes, including indexicals, mood indicators, discourse particles, interjections and pejoratives, and its implications are still being explored.[1]

Blakemore's concerns in *Semantic Constraints on Relevance* were explicitly cognitive: her aim was to contribute to a ''psychologically plausible account of the role of context in utterance interpretation'' (Blakemore, 1987:1). On the formal side, researchers in a tradition inspired by David Kaplan (1989, 1999) also reject Gazdar's slogan and draw the borderline between linguistic semantics and pragmatics in a similar way to Blakemore's (e.g. Potts, 2005, 2007; Gutzmann, 2015). Kaplan (2004:3) describes his reasons for moving beyond the traditional concerns of truth-conditional semantics in the following terms:

> I began to see the semantics of indexicals as having greater affinities with the semantics (or potential semantics) of epithets, diminutives, interjections, nicknames, ethnic slur terms, and the like, than with the paradigms of meaningfulness, things like *fortnight* and *feral* and so on.

However, where Blakemore analyses these expressions in procedural terms and sees them as evidence for a ''non-unitary theory of semantics'', Kaplan analyses them in terms of felicity conditions, or conditions for their appropriate use, and aims to provide a unitary account of what he calls a ''Semantics of Meaning'' and a ''Semantics of Use'':[2]

> I now believe that by attending to rules of use – the right sort of rules of use – we can extend our formal semantics, and thus even our logic, to systematically account for the ignored semantic phenomena, and with surprising and, I hope, illuminating results. (Kaplan, 2004:3)

As far as I know, despite the obvious overlaps in the range of data they are dealing with, there have been no attempts to compare the two approaches in any systematic way.[3] This is partly because of a difference in their priorities. Use theorists generally approach the data from the direction of formal semantics and are primarily concerned with issues of truth and validity, whereas procedural semanticists (typically relevance theorists) generally have a background in pragmatics and are primarily concerned with how language provides inputs to a cognitively plausible comprehension mechanism. Researchers in both frameworks have produced a wealth of subtle observations, but have also encountered a variety of problems that are still awaiting solutions. This raises the question of how they might benefit from each other's results. Are the two frameworks compatible? Are some data best analysed in procedural terms and others in use-conditional terms? Can procedural analyses be straightforwardly translated into use-conditional analyses and vice versa? To the extent that the two frameworks are compatible and their results are inter-translatable, this raises the further question of whether they are genuinely distinct.

I think these questions are worth raising, and although I will not offer any systematic answers, I will comment on them where possible along the way. However, my main aim in this paper is to reassess the conceptual–procedural distinction as it has been drawn in relevance theory in the light of almost thirty years of research, considering some common objections and problems and speculating on how it might be extended in future work.[4] The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2, I look briefly at how the conceptual–procedural distinction was introduced into relevance theory. In Section 3, I discuss the nature of procedural encoding. In Section 4, I consider some parallels and differences between procedural and use-conditional accounts of interjections. In Section 5, I discuss the implications of the conceptual–procedural distinction for lexical pragmatics and reflect on some recent speculative proposals about how it might be extended. In Section 6, I discuss the relation between the conceptual–procedural distinction and current evolutionary approaches to cognition such as the 'massive modularity' hypothesis. Section 7 is a brief conclusion.

2. The conceptual–procedural distinction in relevance theory

At the heart of Diane Blakemore's procedural approach to semantics is the idea that in a pragmatic framework such as relevance theory, where utterance comprehension involves not only identifying the proposition expressed but exploring the cognitive effects achieved by processing it in the context of an appropriately selected set of assumptions, it would be useful to have some linguistic devices whose function is to constrain the inferential comprehension process and guide the

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[1] For a recent collection on procedural meaning, see Escandell-Vidal et al. (2011).

[2] For a recent collection on use-conditional semantics, see Gutzmann and Gärtner (2013).

[3] For some preliminary comparisons, see Blakemore (2011, 2015); Wharton (2016).

[4] For a preliminary reassessment, see Wilson (2011). I have extended the arguments of that paper, addressing different issues and examples where possible in order to keep any overlap to a minimum.