

Pronouns and procedures: Reference and beyond

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Abstract

In this paper I bring together discussion of two types of meaning that have informed and driven Blakemore's work: procedural meaning and expressive meaning, and I consider how application of Blakemore's influential ideas can further our understanding of pronouns in English. I revisit existing procedural accounts of pronouns, and explore the nature of the procedures that they propose. I argue that if we treat procedural meaning as operating at a sub-personal level, then we gain insight not only into how pronouns function in communication, but also into the nature of procedural meaning itself. The cognitive processes triggered by pronouns reveal the speaker's sub-personal categorization of the intended referents. Often this will guide the hearer in reference resolution, but in certain cases the procedures contribute to other inferential processes. I focus on examples where the pronouns lead to expressive effects, and consider what this tells us, more generally, about the nature of pronouns, procedures and expressive meaning.

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1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that when a speaker utters a pronoun in English, the content communicated by use of the pronoun will vary from context to context, although a common core of linguistic meaning will remain constant across these different uses. Consider the example in (1):

(1) I gave it to him.

When spoken by Diane in one particular discourse context, the utterance in (1) might be taken to express the proposition in (2). However, when spoken by Becci in a different context, it might express the proposition in (3).

(2) Diane gave the glass to Billy.

(3) Becci gave the book to Tim.

In some sense Diane and Becci have said the same thing. They have, after all, uttered the same words in the same order. However, the propositions that they have expressed are different and have different truth conditions. Kaplan explained

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this discrepancy by drawing a distinction between content and character (Kaplan, 1989). Diane Blakemore (1987, 1992, 2000, 2002, 2007) offers an alternative perspective by proposing that some linguistic expressions encode procedures, rather than concepts, and that these procedures guide the process of inferential comprehension. Several procedural analyses of pronouns have been developed; in this article I examine these existing accounts and suggest some developments. I make two main claims. First, I claim that pronouns in English are fully procedural, and that their encoded procedural meaning functions at a sub-personal level. Thus, I move away from accounts that analyse pronouns either as encoding concepts directly, or as encoding features that are analysable in terms of concepts in the language of thought. Rather, I will follow Wilson's (2011:10) characterisation of procedural expressions as being "systematically linked to *states of language users*". A speaker's choice of pronoun reflects how that speaker sub-personally categorises the intended referent. An important consequence of this approach is that the procedure encoded by a pronoun can contribute not only to reference resolution but to other inferential processes as well. This brings me to my second main claim. I claim that existing accounts overlook the role played by pronouns above and beyond the identification of the proposition expressed. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on examples where the choice of pronoun is linked to the communication of attitudes and emotions, and by doing so I link the work on procedural meaning to Blakemore's recent work on expressives (Blakemore, 2011, 2014).

In Section 2, I provide a brief overview of the relevance theoretic framework and introduce the idea of procedural meaning. In Section 3, I outline some existing procedural analyses of pronouns. I suggest that while they move us forward in understanding how pronouns function in utterance interpretation, they have various limitations and raise interesting questions about the nature of the procedures themselves. In Section 4, I outline a new approach which treats the procedures encoded by pronouns as operating at a sub-personal level. I will briefly introduce the personal/sub-personal distinction, and discuss how it links to relevance theory generally and procedural meaning specifically. On this approach, the gender, number and person features encoded by pronouns do not pick out personal-level concepts such as MALE or FEMALE which figure in a Fodorian conceptual representation system, or "language of thought" (Fodor, 1975, 2008). Rather, the cognitive processes triggered by pronouns function to constrain potential referents to a sub-personally identifiable set. The features encoded by pronouns function procedurally at this sub-personal level, and while the sub-personal mechanisms which pick out the set of potential referents may involve sub-personal concepts, these may never surface to consciousness or figure as part of the proposition expressed. Finally, in Section 5, I consider examples where the choice of pronoun does not play a role in reference resolution, but contributes to other aspects of the speaker's overall meaning, focusing specifically on the communication of expressive effects.

2. Relevance, procedures and pronouns

2.1. Relevance theory

Relevance theory (Blakemore, 1992; Carston, 2002a; Clark, 2013; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95; Wilson and Sperber, 2004, 2012) takes a cognitive approach to utterance interpretation. According to the first, or cognitive, principle of relevance, human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance. That is, we tend to focus our attention and processing resources on inputs that seem likely to result in cognitive effects. The greater the cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of that input. However, whenever cognitive effects are derived, some mental effort is expended. This too affects the relevance of that input. Other things being equal, the less effort required to derive a given set of cognitive effects, the greater the relevance of the input. Therefore, relevance is a function of cognitive effects on the one hand, and processing effort on the other. When the input is an ostensive, communicative act, such as an utterance, the addressee is entitled to expect that the effort they put into processing it will be rewarded with a certain level of relevance. More specifically, they are entitled to presume that the utterance will be optimally relevant. This is summarised in Sperber and Wilson's second, or communicative, principle of relevance, given in (4):

- (4) Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95:260).

The definition of optimal relevance (5) sets the upper and lower bounds on what an addressee can expect from an ostensive act of communication:

- (5) Presumption of optimal relevance (revised)
- a. The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
 - b. The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95:270).

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