

# The heterogeneity of procedural meaning

Robyn Carston <sup>a,b,\*</sup>



<sup>a</sup> UCL Linguistics, Chandler House, 2 Wakefield Street, London WC1N 1PF, UK

<sup>b</sup> Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN), University of Oslo, PO Box 1020, Blindern, 0315 OSLO, Norway

Received 25 November 2015; received in revised form 13 December 2015; accepted 14 December 2015

Available online 25 January 2016

This paper is a meagre token of affection and esteem for my friend and colleague, Diane Blakemore, whose sensitivity to linguistic and contextual nuance coupled with analytical and theoretical rigour has inspired and illuminated me over several decades. Diane is also one of the most widely read people I know and has a fund of brilliant and lively examples of every conceivable use of language, from air-blueing expletives to highly poetic metaphors. Looking forward to more!

## Abstract

The distinction in relevance theory between two kinds of encoded meaning, conceptual and procedural, has evolved so that more and more components of encoded meaning, both linguistic and non-linguistic, are now taken to be procedural (non-conceptual). I trace these developments and assess the extent to which these diverse elements share properties that distinguish them from concept-expressing words. While the notion of procedural encoding has lost some of its original distinctiveness, it may make sense to think of all encoded meaning as procedural (including the meaning of concept-expressing words), but this necessitates the drawing of new clarifying distinctions among kinds of procedural meaning.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Relevance theory; Procedural meaning; Concepts; Meaning modulation; Discourse connectives; Expressives

## 1. Introduction

Within relevance theory, an important distinction between two kinds of encoded (or conventional) word meaning was initiated by Diane Blakemore in the 1980s: the distinction between words that encode concepts and words that encode procedures. At the time, it looked as if the distinction she had in mind would line up pretty much with the elements of linguistic meaning that contribute to truth-conditional content (the conceptual) and those that do not (the procedural). So it could be seen as a recasting of the truth-conditional/non-truth-conditional semantic distinction in cognitive terms, drawing on the basic distinction in cognitive science between representations (descriptions of the world which are true or false) and computations over representations (including inferential processes that relate representations to one another in different ways, e.g. as premise and conclusion, as contradictory, as collective evidence for an assumption):

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.

\* Correspondence to: UCL Linguistics, Chandler House, 2 Wakefield Street, London WC1N 1PF, UK. Tel.: +44 020 7679 4037.  
E-mail address: [robyn.carston@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:robyn.carston@ucl.ac.uk).

On the other, there is the essentially *procedural* theory that deals with the way in which elements of linguistic structure map directly onto computations themselves—that is, onto mental processes.

– (Blakemore, 1987:144)

This broad alignment of conceptual encoding with mental representations in the language of thought and of procedural encoding with mental processes has been largely maintained in subsequent work on the distinction. However, the notion of procedural meaning has been considerably extended since Blakemore's early work so as to encompass encoded constraints on a range of pragmatic processes; for instance, it has been suggested that pronouns encode procedural meaning which constrains the process of reference assignment, and that morphemes indicating grammatical moods such as the indicative, the imperative, and the subjunctive, and modal particles (e.g. in Japanese), encode procedural meaning that constrains the pragmatic process of identifying the speaker's attitude or degree of commitment to the proposition she has expressed (Wilson and Sperber, 1993; Wilson, 2011). On this basis, it might look as if the conceptual–procedural distinction more or less meshes with the traditional distinction between the substantive lexicon (open class words such as nouns, verbs and adjectives) and the functional lexicon (closed class words like determiners, pronouns and connectives).

However, the notion of procedural (non-conceptual) meaning has also been applied to an array of what might be called 'expressive' communicative devices, including interjections, expletives, manual and facial gestures of certain sorts, and emotional prosody (Wharton, 2009; Wilson and Wharton, 2006). This is a curious situation as we now have under the banner of 'procedural meaning' some of the deepest components of I-language, such as pronouns and indicators of tense, aspect, and mood, together with communicative devices such as 'oops!', 'dammit!', winking, shrugging, and emotion-indicating tones of voice, which would seem to fall well outside I-language. This is not to say that the claim is wrong but it does call for some closer investigation.

The paper consists of two main parts, structured by the distinction between conceptual encoding and procedural encoding. In section 2, I focus on the idea that many words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) encode a concept, raising some problems for this view and presenting some other ways of construing their linguistic meaning and its relation to the concept communicated on an occasion of use. This section is relatively short, as I have discussed my thoughts on this at length elsewhere (Carston, 2012, 2013, forthcoming). In the longer section 3, I turn to the more innovative aspect of the relevance-theoretic view of lexical semantics, according to which certain closed-class words and other units of (ostensive) communication encode 'procedural meaning'. As noted, the idea of procedural encoding now encompasses a vast range of items, linguistic and nonlinguistic. I try to assess whether they constitute a single category of meaning in any positive sense, other than just all being 'non-conceptual'. Finally, in section 4, I consider whether there might be a case for treating all encoded meaning as procedural in a broad sense (much broader than Blakemore's initial idea) and then making a range of important distinctions among different kinds of procedural meaning.

## 2. Conceptual meaning and concepts/senses expressed

This section provides an overview of current ideas about the meaning of substantive (open class) words, which are standardly taken to encode or at least express concepts. It is not intended to be comprehensive or to provide detailed argument, but to set out those features of the story that may need to be called on when discussing the main topic, procedural meaning, in the next section. A terminological clarification: I use 'meaning' for the encoded or standing meaning of a word and 'sense' or 'concept' for those contents that can be expressed or communicated by the use of the word. In principle, at least, it could be that the sense/concept communicated on some occasion is in fact the (standing) meaning of the word.

### 2.1. The standard relevance-theoretic (RT) account

According to the RT view of linguistic communication, many substantive words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) encode an unstructured (atomic) concept,<sup>1</sup> which has an externalist semantics (what it denotes in the world) and various kinds of internalist informational connections, of which the key one here is its associated 'encyclopaedic entry', a repository of general knowledge (in the form of conceptual representations) about the object/property/activity in the world it denotes. To take a simple example, the word 'child' encodes an atomic concept *CHILD* which denotes or refers to a certain category of human beings. It also comes with a stash of general knowledge/beliefs about that category of individuals, perhaps including that they are young, need to be nurtured and looked after by adults, cannot take full responsibility for their own decisions and behaviour, are still developing physically and psychologically, and so on.

<sup>1</sup> Sperber and Wilson (1998) suggest that there are also numerous content words that do not encode a full-fledged concept but what might be called a 'pro-concept', e.g. 'my', 'have', 'near', 'long' (Sperber and Wilson, 1998:185).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/935279>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/935279>

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