

Conditionality in individual minds: An argument for a wholly pragmatic approach to utterance interpretation



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Abstract

There is a growing body of research which undermines the traditional dual-processing model of utterance interpretation, whereby pragmatic inference is preceded by the context-independent process of linguistic decoding. This body of research suggests that utterance interpretation is a *wholly* pragmatic inferential process. In this paper, I seek to defend a wholly pragmatic approach by investigating the role of the purported process of context-independent decoding and the process of pragmatic inference in determining when a conditional is false. I show that material conditionality, like all kinds of conditionality, lies in pragmatically derived holistic thought, i.e. not in any putative linguistic semantics.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Despite the widespread assumption that utterance interpretation proceeds in two stages (context-independent decoding followed by context-dependent pragmatic inferring) and, relatedly, that some sort of linguistic semantics is necessary, the overarching conclusion of contemporary research into meaning (e.g. [Sperber and Wilson, 1995](#); [Levinson, 2000](#)) is that, in utterance interpretation, the role of linguistic semantics is much less, and the role of pragmatic inference much greater, than [Grice \(1989\)](#) envisaged. Going even further, it has been repeatedly suggested that linguistic semantics is anyway a problematic and/or redundant notion.

In philosophical quarters, [Bilgrami \(1992\)](#) puts forward two theses: of content unity and content locality. The thesis of content unity states that holistic content is the only kind of mental content. Holistic content provides a pool, or aggregate, of idiolectal resources for *selective* use in the interpretation of behaviour (including linguistic behaviour) of others. Bilgrami's thesis of content locality states that holistic content is selectively constrained at the 'local' level, i.e. in response to context and that it is such locally constrained content which plays a role in the explanation of communicative behaviour. This locality thesis is intended to 'dissolve the very idea of content composed of context-invariant concepts' ([Bilgrami, 1992:12](#)).

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In linguistic circles, Chomsky (2000:137) notes that Bilgrami's theses seem 'fruitful directions to pursue'. This seems to substantiate Chomsky's (2000:132) suggestion that 'it is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics'. From a psychological perspective, Bilgrami's theses are borne out by Hintzman's (1986) empirically grounded multiple-trace theory of memory and information retrieval, whereby context has immediate/direct influence on the process of utterance interpretation. I discuss this theory in more detail in Section 2.2.

Another philosopher, Fodor (1998, 2008), despite rejecting a holistic account of content, also argues that there is no specifically linguistic semantics¹ and that thought is the only locus of semantic content. This argument is supported by Burton-Roberts (e.g. 2007), who observes that the acquisition of specifically linguistic semantics must be post hoc in that it actually presupposes prior understanding of utterances. This suggests that a specifically linguistic semantics – i.e. a semantics other than that of thought – is not necessary to explain the interpretation of utterances. Burton-Roberts (2013) develops a notion of meaning-as-a-relation, which accounts for how meaning in language is possible without the existence of linguistic semantics. I discuss Burton-Roberts' notion of meaning-as-a-relation in Section 2.1.

Related to the view that a level of linguistic semantics is redundant is Recanati's (2005) argument that compositionality does not apply on the linguistic/lexical semantic level, but operates to combine pragmatically derived concepts. This is an important argument because it undermines one of the main reasons for positing the existence of specifically linguistic semantic content; if compositionality is to explain productivity, i.e. the infinite expressive power of *language* it should apply at the level of *linguistic*, not pragmatically derived content. Equally, the view that linguistic semantics is not necessary receives some support in psycholinguistic quarters. Gibbs (2002) claims that there is no psycholinguistic evidence for the existence of 'some canonical, non-pragmatic meaning that is automatically analysed at both the word and sentence level'.

1.2. Aims

The claim that a level of specifically linguistic semantics is not necessary has as its corollary the proposal that utterance interpretation is a wholly pragmatic process. In this paper, I pursue the claim that a supra-personal, objective level of encoded linguistic semantics is not necessary in explaining meaning in language and I seek to substantiate the claim that utterance interpretation is a *wholly pragmatic* (i.e. *radically* individualistic and holistic)² inferential process by examining conditionals. The paper consists of two parts. The first (Section 2) introduces and deals with the implications of the wholly pragmatic approach and the second (Section 3 onwards) seeks to defend and illustrate the wholly pragmatic approach by investigating the relation between conditionals and material implication. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it may be objected that this narrow focus on conditionals does not allow for an adequate defence or illustration of the wholly pragmatic approach in general. So let me explain this choice. The first reason for looking at conditionals is their significance for the distinction between linguistic semantics and pragmatics. Even though the claim that the word *if* semantically encodes material implication has been controversial in philosophy (e.g. Edgington, 1995), semantico-pragmatic – i.e. dual-processing (decoding followed by inferring) – accounts of the interpretation of conditionals (e.g. Grice, 1989) may be thought of as one of the central achievements of pragmatic theory (e.g. Mauri and van der Auwera, 2012). As such, conditionals present themselves as the most obvious first challenge that the wholly pragmatic approach needs to face. My specific focus on indicative conditionals is dictated by the fact that this group alone exhibits a degree of variation which is sufficient to illustrate the problem of pragmatic intrusion, which is central to my argument. The second reason why it is important to look at conditionals is that they are crucial to the question of how language is used to communicate truth-evaluable propositions. As will be argued in Section 6, the wholly pragmatic approach offers a compelling perspective on this fundamental issue.

In Section 2, I discuss three issues that arise for the wholly pragmatic approach to utterance interpretation:

- the question of what meaning in language is
- the question of how successful communication is possible
- the question of what constitutes the basic premise in the process of utterance interpretation

In Section 3, I argue that traditional, dual-processing accounts are not successful in explaining the biconditional interpretation of conditionals. In Section 4, I discuss an important decoding-inferring asymmetry which arises for

¹ In Fodor's (1998:9, 2008:99) words: 'English has no semantics'.

² Radical individualism is the assumption that linguistic meaning is neither stable nor shared in any way which would support some notion of supra-personal, objective semantic content of linguistic expressions. I assume that radical individualism is in the spirit of Chomsky (2000). I take it that radical individualism and holism are two sides of the same coin in the sense that radically individualistic mental contents associated with word use vary across individuals and, in an individual's mind, form a network of inter-connected associations. I will be later arguing that (i) holism is indeed incompatible with any notion of supra-personal, objective linguistic meaning, and (ii) holism is not problematic once meaning is defined in relational terms of Burton-Roberts (2013).

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