



Univerza v Mariboru

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Koroška cesta 160
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MARIBOR LECTURE SERIES

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Overlooking Conventions: The Trouble with Linguistic Pragmatism

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most exciting development in recent philosophy of language has been the debate surrounding a movement that is called linguistic “pragmatism” or “contextualism”. Paul Grice is the founding father of this movement. Its seminal work is Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson’s *Relevance*. Other important contributors to the debate include Kent Bach, Anne Bezuidenhout, Emma Borg, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore, Robin Carston, Kepa Korta and John Perry, Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone, Stephen Levinson, Stephen Neale, François Recanati, Stephen Schiffer, Rob Stainton, Jason Stanley, Zoltan Szabo, Ken Taylor, and Charles Travis. The lectures have two main aims: to look critically at the methodology of the debate and propose a better one; to use the proposed methodology to argue for a fairly traditional position on the substantive semantics-pragmatics issue and against the radical views of pragmatists.

The folk seem to distinguish what a person *says*, or *literally says*, in an utterance from what the person *means*, from the intended message of the utterance. Grice emphasizes a distinction along these lines between “what is said” and what is “implied, suggested, meant”, giving many interesting examples. Almost everyone thinks that Grice is onto something with this distinction. Sperber and Wilson’s distinction between *explicature* and *implicature* is related. And there are other similar distinctions. These distinctions raise many questions. What is the principled basis for putting something on one side rather than the other? It is taken for granted that what is said arises not only from linguistic conventions but also from disambiguation and reference determination. But does it involve more, as the pragmatists think? Is it appropriate to rely on intuitions in judging this? If not, what? Is what is said “semantic” or rather “pragmatic”, as many pragmatists think? What hangs on this difference? Most important of all: *Why are any of these distinctions theoretically interesting?*

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

My approach centers on that question. The standard methodology of this debate, as indeed of nearly all debates in the philosophy of language, is to consult intuitions. I have been very critical of this

methodology and continue to be here. I think that we need to do much more: we need to find a respectable scientific motivation for our theories and distinctions and a scientifically respectable way of testing them.

The lectures start with this methodological flaw of linguistic pragmatism (Lecture 1). I later argue that there are two more important flaws:

The confusion of “the metaphysics of meaning”, focused on the speaker and concerned with *what constitutes* what is said, meant, etc., with “the epistemology of interpretation”, focused on the hearer and concerned with *how we tell* what a speaker said, meant, etc. (Lecture 3)

The acceptance of “Modified Occam’s Razor”, understood as advising against the positing of a new sense wherever the message can be derived by a pragmatic inference (Lecture 4).

The methodology I urge instead yields a theoretically principled distinction between two sorts of properties of an utterance. On the one hand, there are properties that the utterance has *simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation of her language*. On the other hand, there are properties, which may or may not be different from those ones, that constitute “the message” the speaker intends to convey. I call the first sort “semantic” and part of “what is said” or “the proposition expressed” and the second sort part of “the message” or “the proposition meant.” I call any of the latter that are not semantic “pragmatic”. Evidence of what is said is to be found in evidence of the linguistic rules that have been largely established by conventions. For that evidence we look to the best explanations of regularities in linguistic usage (Lecture 2).

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

From this methodological perspective, I confront the challenge that linguistic pragmatists have posed to the tradition. I argue that three sorts of properties constitute what is said: those arising from (i) convention, (ii) disambiguation, and (iii) reference fixing. This view of what is said is close to the traditional one that the linguistic pragmatists oppose. I then argue, controversially, that almost all of the striking phenomena that they have emphasized exemplify properties of sorts (i) to (iii). There are more of such properties than we have previously noted: much more of the content of messages should be put into the convention-governed what is said – into semantics - than has been customary; conventions have been overlooked. Contrary to what the pragmatists claim, there is no significant “semantic underdetermination”. The new theoretical framework of within a traditional framework (Lecture 5).

LECTURES

Lecture 1, May 3, 17.00 – 20.00, Room 2.8: Introduction; Reliance on Intuitions

Lecture 2, May 4, 10.00 – 13.00, Room 1.5: The Semantics-Pragmatics Distinction; Linguistic Conventions and Language

Lecture 3, May 7, 10.00 – 13.00, Room 0.2: Confusion of the Metaphysics of Meaning with the Epistemology of Interpretation

Lecture 4, May 8, 10.00 – 13.00, Room 2.19: Modified Occam's Razor and the Denial of Linguistic Meanings

Lecture 5, May 11, 10.00 – 13.00, Room 2.8: The Method Applied: Referential Descriptions; Saturation, Polysemy, and Pragmatism's Challenge; Sub-Sententials.

On May 9 and 10 there will be a conference "Devitt's 80th" and Professor M. Devitt will give a talk with the title The reference of proper names: Testing usage and intuitions. He will also comment all the papers that shall be presented at the conference.