

Varieties of lexical adjustment

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According to the Gricean paradigm (1989), pragmatically derived interpretations are in principle sought only after the linguistically encoded content is deemed inadequate to fulfill the speaker's informative intention. In processing terms, this suggests that, during language comprehension, we first compute literal meaning before enriching it against the context. At the utterance level, this strategy has received considerable criticism (e.g. Carston 2002, Recanati 2004) and it seems reasonable to assume that, at least to some extent, an utterance's semantic content needs to be pragmatically enriched to reach full propositional status. At the lexical level, however, things are somewhat different. The priority of some (even minimal) stable lexical meaning is usually presupposed and contextual modulation is customarily discussed on the basis of this encoded content (e.g. Carston 2002, Wilson & Carston 2007).

This last assumption has been questioned in experimental studies that deal with figurative uses of language and, according to which, expressions that are used metaphorically are equally fast to process as their literal counterparts (e.g. Glucksberg 2003, Gibbs & Tendahl 2006). However, as Noveck, Bianco and Castry (2001) have counterargued such conclusions could be the result of rich story contexts which prime the understanding of the metaphors at hand. Our proposed project further tests the different sides of this debate by examining other types of lexical meaning modulation. The types to be investigated will be provided by recent research in lexical pragmatics within Relevance Theory which has distinguished between the following varieties of lexical adjustment (cf. Wilson & Carston 2007): narrowing (e.g. *drink* used to mean *regularly consume alcohol*), approximation (e.g. *red* used to mean *red for the most part*), metaphor and hyperbole (e.g. *pigsty* used to mean *very messy bedroom*), category extension (e.g. *hoover* used to mean *vacuum cleaner*) and word coinage (e.g. *porch* used to mean *throw to a porch*, cf. Clark & Clark 1979).

Apart from addressing the aforementioned debate between Gibbs & Tendahl and Noveck et.al., our experimental study also aims to shed more light to the ways in which lexical information is actually implemented in our everyday communicative practices. If our initial predictions are in general correct, they would mean that the lexical content that is triggered during language comprehension might be genuinely underspecified and in need of pragmatic enrichment at all cases, a conclusion that has been recently entertained both theoretically (e.g. Recanati 2004) and experimentally (e.g. Frisson & Pickering 2007). However, even if our predictions are not upheld, the proposed study might provide a more nuanced view of the unitary approach to lexical pragmatics that relevance theorists currently advocate, providing experimental input to the prediction that at least lexical broadening should be viewed as involving a "continuum of cases between literal use, approximation, metaphor and hyperbole, with no clear divisions between them" (Wilson & Carston 2007:232).

References: Carston, R. (2002) *Thoughts and Utterances*. Oxford: Blackwell; Clark, E. & Clark, H. (1979) 'When nouns surface as verbs', in *Language* 55: 767-811; Frisson, S. & Pickering, M.J. (2007) 'The processing of familiar and novel senses of a word', in *Language and Cognitive Processes* 22: 595-613; Gibbs, R. & Tendahl, M. (2006) 'Cognitive effort and effects in metaphor comprehension', in *Mind & Language* 21: 379-403; Glucksberg, S. (2003) 'The psycholinguistics of metaphor', in *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7: 92-96; Grice, H.P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Noveck, I., Bianco, M. & Castry, A. (2001) 'The costs and benefits of metaphor', in *Metaphor and Symbol* 16: 109-121; Recanati, F. (2004) *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Wilson, D. & Carston, R. (2007) 'A unitary approach to lexical pragmatics', in Burton-Roberts, N. (ed.) *Pragmatics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 230-259.