

Pragmatic Competence – Mindreading Meets Speaker's Meaning

Joanna Szwabe (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

One of the implications of the ostensive–inferential model of communication is that communicating requires dispositions exceeding linguistic competence. The notion of communicative competence (Hymes, Canale&Swain, Savignon, Bachman) functioning in the field of sociolinguistics, drawing on culturally determined ways of language use, proves to be inadequate, when we pose a question of the nature of automatic mechanism guiding pragmatic inference.

On the other hand, the notion of pragmatic competence understood in the Chomskyan spirit – as, for instance, developed by Kasher (1991) in his modular speech acts theory – focuses on linguistic form and conditions of appropriate usage of selected grammatical structures (recognizable by their surface form), while in inferential communication we find procedures acting across structure types. More generally, as cognitive theories of inferential communication convincingly show, reconstruction of speaker's meaning cannot be adequately described within the limits of linguistic form. What follows, an approach sketched along these lines delineates different perspective on study of language and meaning, shifting researchers' attention from linguistic form to inference.

The aim of the present study is to frame an understanding of pragmatic competence that would account for mechanisms bridging mind and language in reconstruction of unspoken, nevertheless, communicated meaning. As such it would encompass universal rules, homogenous along ethnic language variety, unrelated to culture–bound knowledge of social conventions of communication, and finally, automatically applied.

In accordance with the above stated goal I will propose and defend the notion of pragmatic competence understood as an ability to construct and reconstruct uncoded meaning of utterances and to recognize speech acts.

As such, pragmatic competence resides most probably on three mechanism narrowing the range of possible interpretations:

- 1) Interpretative heuristics – context-independent automatic procedures for assigning default meaning (Levinson 2000)
- 2) General tendency of human cognition to be geared to maximization of relevance, applied to verbal stimuli (Sperber & Wilson 1995)
- 3) Disposition to perceive verbal behaviour in terms of intentionality, involving presumably Theory of Mind or 'mindreading module' (Baron-Cohen 1995)

As post-Gricean pragmatics, developed by Levinson and Sperber & Wilson, is widely acknowledged in linguistic community, I will concentrate on the discussion of collected evidence for correlation between disorders of mental states attribution on the grounds of behaviour (mindreading) and disturbed or missing reconstruction of uncoded communicated meaning (conversational implicatures in particular) observed in:

- autistic subjects (Bartak, Rutter & Cox: 1975, 1977, Happe 1995)
- subjects with diagnosed semantic-pragmatic disorder (Blank & Marquis 1987, Bishop 1989)
- schizophrenic subjects (Langdon et alii 2002)
- children under 4 (author's observations, discussion of counterarguments posed by Bloom (2002), Gluer & Pagin (2003), Papafragou (2002))

It must be emphasized that the above mentioned abilities can be selectively impaired, leaving the linguistic competence untouched, thus pointing to independence of pragmatic competence.

Finally, the practical need for redefining pragmatic competence will be discussed in the light of diagnostic problems encountered in communicative disorders therapy.

Selected bibliography:

- Baron-Cohen, Simon. 1995. *Mindblindness. An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*. MIT Press.
- Bishop, D.V.M. 1989. Autism, Asperger's syndrome and semantic-pragmatic disorder: Where are the boundaries? in *British Journal of Disorders of Communication* 24, pp. 107-121
- Bloom, Paul. 2002. Mindreading, Communication and the Learning of Names of Things. In *Mind and Language*, Vol. 17 Nos 1&2, pp.37-54

- Garfield, Jay et alli. 2001. Social Cognition, Language Acquisition and The Development of the Theory of Mind. In *Mind and Language*, Vol. 16 No 5, pp. 494–541
- Gluer, Kathrin & Pagin, Peter. 2003. Meaning Theory and Autistic Speakers. In *Mind and Language*. Vol. 18 No.1, pp.23–51
- Kasher, Asa.1984. Pragmatics and the modularity of the Mind. in *Journal of Pragmatics* 8, pp. 539–557
- Kasher, Asa. 1991. Pragmatics and Chomsky's research program in Asa Kasher (ed.) *The Chomskyan Turn*. Blackwell;122–149
- Kitao,Kathlen&Kitao, Kenji.1996. Testing Communicative Competence in *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. II, No. 5
- Langdon,Robyn et alli. 2002. Disturbed communication in schizophrenia: the role of poor pragmatics and poor mind–reading in *Psychological Medicine* 32, 1273–1284
- Levinson, Stephen. 2000. *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. MIT Press.
- Neville,Anne. 1990. Unestablished Referent in Children Conversations: an Assessment Procedure. In *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, Vol. 6, No. 2
- Origgi, Gloria & Sperber, Dan.2000.Evolution, Communication and the Proper Function of Language in Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlaine (ed.) *Evolution and the Human Mind: Language, Modularity and Social Cognition*. Cambridge University Press; pp. 140–169
- Papafragou, Anna. 2002. Mindreading and Verbal Communication. In *Mind and Language*, Vol. 17 Nos 1&2, pp.55–67
- Prutting C. & Kirchner D. 1987. A clinical appraisal of the pragmatic aspects of language in *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders* 52, pp. 105–119
- Sperber, Dan & Wilson, Deirdre. 1986/1995. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Sperber, Dan & Wilson, Deirdre. 2002. Pragmatics, Modularity, and Mind–reading. In *Mind and Language* 17; pp. 3–23
- Sperber, Dan.2004. Modularity and Relevance: How can a massively modular mind be flexible and context–sensitive? in Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence & Stephen Stich (eds.) *The Innate Mind: Structure and Content*