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The Place of Intentions in Pragmatics: Towards a Unified Approach

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ABSTRACT

It is indubitably clear that intention is at the heart of every definition of pragmatics as a sub-discipline of linguistics. One rallying point from these definitions is that pragmatics is about intention attribution but the big question is- how do we arrive at speaker intention? It is agreeable that if hearer's attribute approximately the same intentions to a speaker, then communication can be said to be successful nevertheless, it is observed that most of the interpretation of speaker intention is according to the Gricean perspective which to a large extent, is domiciled in the mind of the speaker and is grossly challenged to be inadequate in ascertaining the right intention. The main aim of the study is to highlight the major tenets of the three approaches to intention attribution in order to identify their inadequacies in isolation and call for a reassessment of these views. The work affirms the notion held by Verschueren and concludes that communication is not always dependent on speaker intention. The work submits that, intention is not one way, it is both intrinsic and derived as it adopts an approach to intention provenance which is an intermarriage of Gricean perspective, Sociological-interactional perspective and the Cognitive philosophical perspective as a means to arriving at correct intention attribution. The research uses a story from an online discussion forum to qualitatively demonstrate the inadequacies of using a single perspective in inferring speaker intentions and further challenges the position of Gricean intentions in deciphering meaning.

Keywords: Pragmatics, intentions, Unified approach, Communications and Philosophical story.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the basic ingredient of all human communication. It is the vehicle with which the message in an utterance is made clear and that message is centered on the intention of the speaker as perceived by the listener. Every human being possesses an inherent ability to acquire and develop the language faculty in him and by that, he is able to make his intentions clear and is able to infer the intentions of other speakers. Human beings, unique

among animals, possess a basic communicative competence that sustains both the linguistic and the extralinguistic way of expressing it. Furthermore, if we are to speak of communication and not simply of information transmission, then agents must devote themselves intentionally to such common activity. Bara is of the view that...

Communication is essentially a cooperative activity between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed by all those actors together engaged in the shared task of reciprocally attending to the other communicants' words. The aims of the actors engaged in an interaction may differ, but to be able to say that communication has taken place successfully, all the participants must share a set of mental states [1].

This then means that, for every successful communication, the right speaker intention must be arrived at and that is only possible when interlocutors in discourse share a set of mental states. Haugh is of the view that 'If the intentions attributed by the hearers are roughly the same as those expressed by the speaker, then communication is considered to have been successful [2].

Mouton states that 'if pragmatics is the study of meaning-in-context, then cognitive pragmatics can be broadly defined as encompassing the cognitive principles and mental states involved in the construal of meaning-in-context [3].

At any given time, human beings possess a set of mental states. These may be both emotional and cognitive, and both of these may be either conscious or unconscious. Mouton asserts that 'The aims of the actors engaged in an interaction may differ, but to be able to say that communication has taken place successfully, all the participants must share a set of mental states [4]. The various mental states are broadly, emotional and

cognitive but here we will deal only with those states that are relevant for an understanding of the process of communication; that is, states that are causally relevant in interactions between humans with specific emphasis on intentions and the place of intentions in pragmatics. For example; plans, motivation and belief among others. Stojanović-Prelević further emphasises that the theory of communication describes communication as speech acts which produce communicative intentions. Grice thinks that 'it is important for successful communication that the hearer recognises the speaker's communicative intention [5].

The kernel of this research work is therefore, to discuss the concept of intentions, to examine the place of intentions in pragmatics by examining the three major perspectives of intentions in pragmatics and to project a way forward towards a unified approach to achieving an all encompassing interpretation of speaker intentions[6].

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

- To highlight the major tenets of the three theories on intention in pragmatics from the two broad schools of pragmatics.
- To identify the inadequacies of using each of these approaches in isolation to arrive at speaker intention.
- To demonstrate these inadequacies using a story adapted from an online discussion forum on DLIFE and project a way forward by adopting a unified approach.

THE CONCEPT OF INTENTION

The term Intention comes from the Latin word *intendere*, meaning aiming in a certain direction, directing thoughts to something, it has been used to name the property of minds of having content, being about something. In other words, it means the ability of minds to represent objects, properties, or states of affairs [7].

According to Haugh and Jaszczolt Speaker intentions made their way into contemporary pragmatics through three different but interrelated routes. One of them dates back at least

to medieval philosophy and the inquiries into the logic of modal contexts, leading to the study of intentionality. Another begins with ordinary language philosophy of the mid-1950s and the attempts to define meaning through language use, which in turn led to the employment of the concept of speakers intended effect of an act of communication. The third, and arguably the most influential route, was that of the attempts to rescue formal semantic analyses by employing the concept of meaning which would incorporate not only the truth-conditional content but also the intended implicated messages, forming the overall concept of communicated content [8].

The concept of intention helps in the general understanding of human behaviour. This is because, in realising an intentional act, one can ascertain the behavioural pattern or reasons behind the very intention of the speaker. Anscombe holds that...

there are many descriptions of happenings which are directly dependent on our possessing the *form* of description of intentional actions. It is easy not to notice this, because it is perfectly possible for some of these descriptions to be of what is done unintentionally. For example 'offending someone'; one can do this unintentionally, but there would be no such thing if it were never the description of an intentional action [9].

From the foregoing, identifying the intention behind an act results in understanding the unintentional act. This study shares the view by Haugh and Jaszczolt that the notions of intention and intentionality have since been deployed in a multitude of ways in explaining speaker meaning [10], speech acts [11], the development of language and social development [12] and the cognitive processes underlying action and meaning interpretation [2],[7], to name just a few. However, this proliferation has generated challenges for the conceptual and theoretical status of intentionality and intention in pragmatics [13].

A number of debates are on-going on the concept of intentions. Searle says that our beliefs and intentions have intrinsic, basic intentionality, while linguistic expressions have derived intentionality in the sense that the meaning of acts of speech can be analysed in terms of intentional states, such as belief or intention. In other words, Searle says that the mind 'imposes' intentionality, so to speak, on linguistic expressions in that the basic intention to represent is responsible for the derived intention to communicate. In brief, beliefs have intrinsic intentionality, while utterances have derived intentionality (84), or "I impose Intentionality on my utterances by intentionally conferring on them certain conditions of satisfaction which are the conditions of satisfaction of certain psychological states" [14].

By this we presuppose a double layer, just to make a distinction that intentionality is intrinsic while intention is the property of their owners but, at the heart of our study is the notion that intention is basically that which the speaker hopes to be deduced by the addressee and correctly attributing meaning in line with the speaker's hopes, leads to a successful communication. Intention is almost always embedded in the message and is revealed when it goes in line with our shared mental states. Nonetheless, as Levinson rightly asserts, we intentions almost always super ordinate individual intentions, by this we mean that, where there is a collective agreement, the intention there is placed over and above a single individual's intention. The collective intention is what is called-we intentions. In Levinson's words, we-intentions, rather than individual intentions, underlie communication [15].

METHODOLOGY

The researcher examines the place of intentions in pragmatics by bringing to bare the doctrines of three approaches to a theory under the two broad schools of pragmatics which are; the Anglo-American pragmatics and the European-Continental pragmatics and uses as its data, a story retrieved from an online discussion forum on D Life is to demonstrate the inadequacies of using each perspective in isolation to arrive at correct speaker intention.

The data is analyzed by using the interpretations of the characters in the story to the same body of information to discuss and interpret the inadequacies of a single approach in isolation and to call for a reassessment of these approaches.

The study is descriptive in nature as it examines the concept of intentions and the rising debates on the place of intentions in pragmatics. The work projects a way forward by emphasising on the need to adopt a unified approach or draw insights from the three perspectives in order to achieve a near complete interpretation of meaning

COGNITIVE PHILOSOPHICAL PRAGMATICS PERSPECTIVE ON INTENTIONS

Cognitive philosophical pragmatics is drawn from Anglo-American Pragmatics as one of the broad schools of pragmatics. It holds that communication is about speakers expressing their intentions and hearers attributing intentions to those speakers. The importance of intention to the cognitive philosophical pragmatic school is traced to Grice's seminal work on speaker meaning. This perspective projects the notion by Haugh that 'pragmatics is or should be about the study of meaning beyond what is said [16].

The importance of intention attribution in pragmatics is not the bone of contention here but how exactly do we attribute meaning to speaker's intention. It is obvious that one of the tasks of pragmatics is to explicate how exactly the hearer makes inferences as well as how hearers and speakers know that the correct inferences have been made.

According to Levinson who is one of the proponents of cognitive philosophical perspective, 'human communication is actually dependent on the existence of communicative intentions specifically, gricean intentions which exist in the minds of speakers and about which addressees make inferences'. Cognitive-philosophical perspective on pragmatics holds that intention is central or is at the heart of pragmatics. Levinson opines that communication is crucially dependent on the existence of communicative intentions.

The cognitive philosophical perspective challenges the role of Gricean intentions especially, Grice's emphasis on reflexivity of communicative intentions. It rather suggests

that attention should be drawn to the relative neglect of conventionality, saying that, 'we intentions and not individual intentions should underlie meaning [17]. For example, using the Nigerian situation where the action of the payment of brideprice is done by a group consisting of the groom's family and friends, the intention to marry the maiden is not recognised solely as that of the groom but what comes to play there, is the 'we intention'. Whatever meaning is attributed to utterances, is shared by the entire group. So, intention as it exists in the mind of a particular speaker at that point, does not count.

Cognitive Philosophical approaches to pragmatics, views intention as a priori mental state. The meaning given to the intention here is not drawn from the utterances made or the interactional cues but as that which is premeditated upon and exists within the mind of the speaker before the utterances are made.

SOCIOLOGICAL INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON INTENTIONS

This perspective is labeled as problematic because communication is not always dependent on speaker's intention. Verschueren, a proponent of this philosophical view, does not always regard speaker intentions as central to communication. Making a point on this view, Mey affirms that 'pragmatics is or should be the study of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society [17] . Sociological-Interactional perspective on the other hand gives little attention to the role of intentions in pragmatics. They claim that, intention is rather a post facto construct and should not be domicile in the mind of the speaker but be inferred according to the conditions of the society and other interactional cues. There are three levels identified by Levinson; intention in the mind, intention in interaction and intention as a sociological system.

One key factor of correct intention arrival is interaction although; it is true that intention can be arrived at by cognition. Sociological interactional perspective has to do with socio-cultural systems and the way they function. As a one of its tenets, intention is assigned a

role in analysing interactions. Here, we intentions are projected over and above personal intentions.

Although sociological interactional approach to deciphering intentions has received little attention, the role it plays is more or less a post factor construct explicitly topicalised in accounting for actions including violation of norms or other interactional troubles or implicitly invoked in other subtle ways through interaction. Here, they argue that intention attribution should be culture specific and a more radical reconceptualisation of intention be adopted away from the Gricean perspective on intentions.

GRICEAN PERSPECTIVE ON INTENTIONS

The Gricean perspective of intentions derives its force from the individual's interaction; the particular linguistic items employed are used to generate the intention of the speaker. One of the challenges of the Gricean intentions is that it does not put into consideration societal conventions in meaning making and it is to a large extent only domicile in the mind of the speaker.

Relevance theorists have deconstructed Gricean intentions into 'informative intentions that seek to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions' while the communicative intention is 'the intention to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention'. Nemeth points out the distinction between communicative language use and informative language use by saying that 'the informative language use is more dynamic in that there is room for speakers to make self correction whereas that does not exist with communicative language use'. While Gricean intentions lean more with the former, sociological interactional approach aligns more with the later.

The challenge in employing the Gricean approach only in attributing meaning lies in the fact that, what the speaker may be intending in his mind may be misunderstood by the listeners. This is because often times, more than one meaning can be assigned to a set of

linguistic items depending on the context. Wharton has this to say 'the ranges of meaning that can arise from an utterance are much more complex than the intentions normally attributed to speakers in explicating observed behavior [17].

PRESENTATION OF DATA

The Saxena's were unable to conceive children and decided to use a surrogate father to start their family. On the day the proxy father arrived, Mr. Saxena kissed his wife goodbye and said, 'well, I'm off now. The man should be here soon'. Half an hour later, just by chance, a door-to-door baby photographer happened to ring the door bell, hoping to make a sale. 'goodmorning, ma'am, he said, 'I've come to...'

'Oh, no need to explain', Mrs. Saxena cut in, embarrassed 'I've been expecting you' 'have you really?' said the photographer. 'Well, that's good. Did you know babies are my specialty?' 'Well, that's what my husband and I hoped. Please come in and have a seat'. After a moment she asked, blushing 'Well, where do we start?' 'Leave everything to me. I usually try two in the bath tub, one on the couch and perhaps a couple on the bed. And sometimes, the living room floor is fun, you can really spread out there.' 'bath tub, living room floor? No wonder it didn't work out for Harish and me!'

'Well ma'am, none of us can guarantee a good one every time. But if you try several different positions and I shoot from six or seven angles, I'm sure you'll be pleased with the results.' 'My God, that's a lot!' gasped Mrs. Saxena. 'Ma'am in my line of work, a man has to take his time. I'd love to be in and out in five minutes, but I'm sure you'd be disappointed with that.' 'Don't I know it,' said Mrs saxena quietly. The photographer opened his briefcase and pulled out a portfolio of his baby pictures. 'This was done on the top of a bus,' he said. 'Oh, My Gosh!' Mrs. Saxena exclaimed, grasping at her throat 'and these twins turned out exceptionally well-when you considered their mother was so difficult to work with.' 'She was difficult?' asked Mrs Saxena.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. I finally had to take her to the park to get the job done right. People were crowding around four and five deep to get a good look' 'Four and five deep?' Said Mrs

Saxena, her eyes wide with amazement. 'Yes', the photographer replied. 'and! For more than three hours too.' 'the mother was constantly squealing and yelling - I could hardly concentrate, and when darkness approached, I had to rush my shuts. Finally, when the squirrels began nibbling on my equipment, I just had to pack it all in.' Mrs. Saxena leaned forward. 'Do you mean they actually chewed on your, uh...equipment?' 'It's true, ma'am, yes...well, if you are ready, I'll set up my tripod and we can get to work right away.' 'Tripod?' 'Oh yes, ma'am. I need to use a tripod to rest my canon on it. It's much too big to be held in the hand. Very long!!!

Mrs Saxena fainted.

INTERPRETATION OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the discourse above, using insights from **cognitive philosophical** point of view, we could easily conclude that the communication was towing the path of success until Mrs Saxena fainted. Considering the fact that the linguistic choices made were in consonance with the two contexts of occurrence, it could be said that the meaning arrived at by both interlocutors amounted to a near success but, having varied mental states and different background knowledge resulted in a huge misunderstanding on the path of both interlocutors. Although the communicative intention was successful, the informative intention was faulted as two different contexts were at play and this goes to prove that the concept of context is indeed monolithic and poses a problem for intention attribution.

Despite the fact that cognitive philosophical perspective preaches that 'we intentions' should be placed above individual intentions, we see individual intentions coming to play more in this analogy. Mrs. Saxena attempts to understand the photographer by his communicative intention disregarding other factors which are of equal importance and this makes this view in isolation, inappropriate.

Cognitive Philosophical Perspective views intention as a priori mental state as it claims that meaning is not generated from utterances or from interactional cues but as that which is

premeditated upon. The story above disproves this view because both the photographer and Mrs. Saxena had not premeditated upon the contexts that came to play. Adopting this view in isolation is thus problematic.

From the **sociological interactional perspective**, the dual intentions of the interlocutors in this discourse were topicalised following their linguistic choices but the non-linguistic was undermined and this accounted for their actions. This school of thought postulates that intention attribution should be guided by the conditions of society; in this case, the society provides for or allows the use of a surrogate father as well as a door-to-door photographer. It also emphasises that socio-cultural systems and all socio-cultural milieu must be considered in deducing meaning. The culture specific nature of this perspective tends to undermine the importance of individual or speaker's intention. Using the Saxena's story, if we will attribute meaning to the story, we would easily say that drawing from all the conditions of society and interactional cues, the conversation was taking a successful course but looking inwards, we see that unless we bring to play the two speaker's intentions, we will be mistaken.

Looking at the analogy from **Gricean perspective** will also leave us in doubt of the true meaning intended. This is because, gricean perspective considers intention as that which is domicile in the mind of the speaker. What Mrs. Saxena had in mind as her intention is quite different from what the photographer intended, vice versa. It also does not put into consideration, societal conditions but it is absolutely necessary for Mrs. Saxena to have considered the societal conditions at that time. That someone other than the surrogate father could come. What she perceived to be his intention was actually not his intention and he as well misunderstood her point of view. Gricean perspective emphasises informative intention over communicative intention but in actual sense, the two are interdependent.

Although Cognitive Philosophical perspective is of the view that human communication is dependent on communicative intentions, it is worth noting that communicative intentions draw largely from the non-linguistic intention/non-verbal intention.

The argument is that, though intention inference is at the heart of every pragmatic definition, people have largely been involved in using the Gricean Perspective to arrive at speaker intention and that is considered inadequate since Gricean intentions are only domicile in the mind of the speaker, they are biased and subjective. The place of intentions should therefore be in Cognitive Philosophical perspective, Gricean perspective of intentions and in Sociological-interactional perspective and not just in one perspective alone. This is in affirmation of Levinson's view.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The concept of intentions in pragmatics is not straight-jacketed as it can be arrived at either cognitively or by interactional cues but the crux of the matter here is that meaning attribution should derive its force from drawing insights from all three perspectives including linguistic and non-linguistic features.

The work promotes a multi-faceted and an interdependent approach to the attribution of meaning as against the independent approach especially as propounded in the notion of Gricean intentions. In order to attain near-perfection in deducing meaning and minimising the risk of misunderstanding in discourse, the study underscores the need to adopt a unified approach to deciphering meaning. Since the notion of manipulative intentions underlie both communicative and informative intentions, it is important to adopt a unified approach.

CONCLUSION

Though the concept of intentions in pragmatics is slippery or elusive, we cannot completely do away with its centrality in the study of pragmatics. We must pull together

the imminent views of the two schools of thought in attributing intentions to a speaker's utterance. We must consider all societal conditions, interactional cues, socio-cultural milieu, conventional ties as well as the individual intention in deciphering meaning. In essence, the study subscribes to a unified approach in handling the issue of the place of intentions in pragmatics.

In the perspective on Gricean intentions, intention is intrinsic but for the sociological-interactional perspective, intention is derived by our linguistic choices. The work submits that, intention is not one way, it is both intrinsic and derived but for a near perfect meaning attribution, it must be arrived at by putting together all other factors- linguistic and non-linguistic.

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