

Book Review: Pragmatics and Cognition: Vega Moreno (2007)

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SUMMARY

The main concern of Vega Moreno's "*Creativity and Convention*" is to provide "a pragmatic inferential approach to the comprehension of everyday metaphorical and idiomatic speech". This approach in its inferential processing character does not vary from ordinary literal utterances (pp. 1-2). Vega Moreno's study is situated in the framework of Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995). She consequently argues from the wider perspective of human (creative) cognition. RT presupposes that the human mind is (biologically) predisposed to efficiently process information. In doing so, the theory claims, the human mind is generally searching for relevance. Sperber and Wilson (1995:49) have called this automatism "Cognitive Principle of Relevance". It is this tendency of the human mind which also makes manipulations and predictions about the mental states of others possible. Thus, a speaker may indicate (by giving a certain stimulus) his communicative intention (i.e. manipulation) while relying upon the hearer processing the given information in the intended way (i.e. prediction). For scholars within the tradition of RT, inferential communication is "ostensive", because it involves in addition to the informative intention an extra communicative intention (Sperber/Wilson 1995:50-54, see also Sperber/Wilson 2008:610-614) which has to be recognized for efficiently processing information (Sperber/Wilson 1995:50). With her study Vega Moreno explicitly refers to this basic RT idea, when she argues for "the comprehension of linguistic utterances in general, and of figurative utterances in particular" as being a "selective process" whose result is "either creativity or conventionalization", for both involve "the construction of new ad hoc concepts" (pp. 2, 3).

The first chapter adumbrates the human creative cognition perspective and outlines "selectivity" as an important property for information processing. More precisely, creativity is described as the cognitive ability of "constructing, combining and modifying mental representations in thinking or in understanding what others think" (p. 5). It is this cognitive process and the minds' selectivity that are of outstanding interest for the argumentation of Vega Moreno (p. 6). She finds evidence in psychological research for how the human mind selects information by creating ad hoc-categories. As the name implies, these categories are not permanently stored but instead they are build in order to carry out a cognitive task on-line, e.g. a problem-solving task. RT claims that the human mind possesses stable concepts and furthermore has the ability to build new concepts ad hoc, for the latter can be described as subsets of the former. In line with this assumption, for which RT provides some empirical evidence, it is argued that selection "results in a representation which denotes a subset (or

superset) of the general category” when merely some features of a (stable) concept are accessible while processing a certain task (p. 21). The newly constructed concept is what is then called an ad hoc-concept.

Chapter two explores the theoretical basis for Vega Moreno’s study on the pragmatics of everyday figurative speech: Sperber’s & Wilson’s (1986, 1995) Relevance Theory. Vega Moreno briefly outlines the connection between communication and cognition. Starting from the very basic RT notion of the Cognitive Principle of Relevance and people’s — certainly limited — ability of reading other people’s mind (see e.g. Wilson 2000, Papafragou 2002), Vega Moreno traces the main line of argument of the RT comprehension procedure. Brought about by evolution, this procedure “together with the notion of optimal relevance and the communicative principle of relevance, are the key components of relevance-theoretic pragmatics” (p. 35). RT suggests that implicatures derive not consecutively but parallel to explicatures when interpreting an utterance. The interpretation process is driven by relevance and, consequently, is selective. According to this, Vega Moreno argues that understanding is a creative process (p. 43). When interpreting an utterance, the hearer’s access to contextual assumptions a speaker makes is guided by the comprehension procedures RT explains. Vega Moreno relates these procedures to the so-called spreading activation models of memory. According to these, activating a concept initiates the further activation of semantically related concepts (in a certain degree of semantic depth) and so forth. From the lexical-pragmatic RT position, the number of constructed and represented cognitive concepts is much larger than the number of lexicalized linguistic concepts (p. 47). Factors influencing the pragmatic process of understanding an utterance, i.e. of processing relevant information, are the *narrowing* and the *broadening* of encoded concepts in contexts, which are “two different instantiations of a single process of pragmatic fine-tuning of the linguistically-specified meaning of a word” (p. 49). Accordingly, for RT “people often construct ad hoc concepts during utterance interpretation by broadening or narrowing the encoded concepts. Furthermore, [RT; J.J.] proposes that it is this ad hoc concept constructed on-line [...], and not the concept encoded by the word, which the hearer takes as a constituent of the explicature.” (p. 50). Under this perspective, the pragmatic fine-tuning process remains the same both when a literal intended utterance and a metaphorical intended utterance are interpreted. This is the main theoretical assumption that Vega Moreno discusses.

Chapter three focuses on metaphors under two perspectives, since metaphors are viewed as being both a form of creative language use and a touchstone for every theory of meaning. Vega Moreno asks how existing theories of metaphors explain metaphorical meaning construction. She critically takes into consideration different approaches: the classical view of metaphor that understands metaphor as a derivation from literalness and truthfulness; theories that understand metaphorical interpretation as derived from an utterance’s literalness; the comparison view and matching models; and, discussed in more detail, the Class-Inclusion Theory by Glucksberg & Keysar (1990), which is important for Vega Moreno’s further argumentation (more precisely: the property-attribution hypothesis). She basically agrees with the interactive idea of this approach, but criticizes that no explanation is given of “what [in the metaphorical meaning construction process; J.J.] determines the formation of [...] different ad hoc-categories [...] on each occasion” (p. 73). On the background of several empirical studies and in line with different theories she discusses the importance of the emergence of features for metaphorical meaning construction. In this context, both selection processes and attributing processes come to the fore. Yet, it is not enough to know “the selection of vehicle properties and attribution of these properties” for understanding how interpretation of metaphors works. It is more important to ask how properties are transformed, when a metaphorical expression is interpreted, “into properties that can be

appropriately attributed” (p. 82). For this widely unresolved problem (i.e. the transformation problem) a RT approach of metaphor comprehension in accordance with empirical psycholinguistic evidence may offer an adequate explanation.

Chapter four elaborates the announced RT approach of metaphor interpretation. RT allows overcoming the literal priority as claimed by some non-cognitive metaphor approaches. It does so in not clearly distinguishing between different shapes of loose use of language and between loose use and literal use of language. Viewed from a RT perspective, a speaker communicates both, the expressed proposition and a set of implications of that proposition (the encoded concept). While selecting encyclopaedic assumptions from the encoded concept, a hearer ad hoc builds a new concept. “It is this new, broader ad hoc concept [...] constructed during the comprehension process, and not the encoded concept that [...] is taken to be a constituent of the proposition expressed by the utterance” (p. 92). Whether the utterance is understood as literal or as a form of loose use, depends, according to RT, on the hearer’s selection of assumptions included in that ad hoc concept; the selection follows a hierarchical order of cognitive accessibility. The criterion guiding the interpretation process is ‘relevance’. The RT pragmatic processes involved in interpreting utterances like “*John is a soldier.*” or “*I am afraid about the divorce. My husband’s lawyer is a shark.*” are above all inferential processes. Such transformation processes involve the pragmatic adjustment of the explicit content of that utterance, of contextual assumptions, and of implicatures as well as it involves the lexical-pragmatic fine-tuning in understanding the utterance either literally or figuratively (p. 95). The specification of metaphorical force, and more generally the distinction of looseness/creativity and convention/literalness of an utterance, is regarded as depending on the requirement of pragmatic adjustment, i.e. as depending on “the strength of the explicatures and implicatures which the hearer takes the speaker to have intended to convey and the amount of processing required to derive them” (pp. 112, 113). In other words: the more creative the metaphor the more adjustment is required. Given the RT premise of our cognitive disposition being triggered by relevance, frequency of use and familiarity of an expression reduce the cognitive effort of the hearer searching for relevance when interpreting an utterance. This is what Vega Moreno calls “pragmatic routine” (pp.116-119).

Chapter five distinguishes the RT approach of metaphor from Class Inclusion Theory (CIT) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). RT and CIT share the assumption that in a metaphorical expression, the metaphorical word’s content is part of the explicit content of that utterance (in the utterance “*My lawyer is a shark*” the content of ‘shark’). According to both theories, the ad hoc-concept SHARK*, which entails ‘aggressiveness of animals and people which makes one fear ...’, is part of the explicit content of the utterance but differs from the concept SHARK encoded by the word ‘shark’. The theories vary, however, in their explanation of how the conceptual construction is processed while understanding the utterance (pp. 121-130). In contrast to both of these theories CMT does not explain (and does not want to do so) on-line comprehension of metaphors but primarily looks at ‘why’ we live in metaphors. For Vega Moreno is of primary importance that RT allows indeed explaining the comprehension processes of communication – be they literal or figurative. She criticizes with regard to CMT that not only the concept of ‘conceptual metaphor’ remains unclear but also their role in structuring our thought and in comprehending metaphorical language use.

Chapter six and seven report mainly psycholinguistic research on comprehension processes of idiomatic expressions. Idioms share the “ability to move back and forth between literalness and looseness, creativity and standardisation” (p. 185) and, hence, are interesting phenomena for an RT approach. Vega Moreno first discusses the analysability and compositionality of idioms. She then

points out that it is necessary to examine how the transparency of idioms in on-line processing (p. 174), i.e. the relation between the single words of an idiomatic expression and the expression as a whole, relates to their role in on-line language processing. Vega Moreno argues that RT offers an answer to these research questions. The author claims that hearers process idioms like “*spill the beans*” always the same, i.e. irrespective from their degree of literalness or looseness. She furthermore claims that comprehension processes of idioms do not differ from those of non-idiomatic expressions.

Chapter eight finally summarizes first the argument of ordinary language use floating between creativity and conventionality, and secondly that of pragmatic routines guiding hearers through these free floating boundaries of utterances. It is this “psychology of routines” (p. 221) that Vega Moreno asks for and that she defends against the background of general psychological and psycholinguistic evidence about utterance comprehension as gained by RT.

EVALUATION

Creativity and Convention is a valuable book for scholars interested in pragmatic processes of understanding figurative speech and sharing cognitive pragmatic presumptions. With creativity and conventionality the book highlights two ‘aggregate states’ of language use resulting while interpreting everyday (figurative) speech. Embedded in the RT framework Vega Moreno starts her argumentation from a critique of traditional models of figurative and conventional language use on the basis of the criterion of familiarity. Under this perspective meaning consists in retrieving static patterns from memory, and not — as RT suggests — in on-line processing linguistic expressions on the basis of both their encoded literal meaning and of the context. Consequently, traditional models fail in explaining idiom variants and possibly different meanings resulting from one and the same linguistic expression (pp. 1-3). This critique is the very starting point of the book.

There are two main arguments developed in *Creativity and Convention* which seem to me the most interesting and fruitful contribution of the book to explaining pragmatic (inferential) processes: First the assumption that not the encoded concept (the concept PIGSTY encoded by the word *pigsty*) but the construction of a new and broader ad hoc-concept (MAX’S ROOM IS A PIGSTY*) is a constituent of the proposition expressed with an utterance, i.e. of the explicature. When interpreting an utterance as e.g. *Max’s room is a pigsty* the hearer chooses the ‘right’ aspects of the constructed ad hoc-concept by processing them in order of their accessibility. He thereby is guided by his permanent search for relevance during which he always chooses the path of least cognitive effort. There is no doubt that this argument offers a plausible explanation for the selection problem in interpretation processes. However, it is not extensive enough for describing *why* selection happens *in a way*. When Peter asks: “*Can we trust John to do as we tell him and defend the interests of the Linguistics Department in the University Council?*”, and Mary answers: “*John is a soldier!*” (pp. 92-93) a subset of possible encyclopaedic assumptions is activated by the hearer when interpreting Mary’s answer in the given context:

- (a) John is devoted to his duty.
- (b) John willingly follows orders.
- (c) John does not question authority.
- (d) John identifies with the goals of his team.

- (e) John is a patriot.
- (f) John earns a soldier's pay.
- (g) John is a member of the military. (cf. p. 93).

Vega Moreno explains that “[t]he process stops when once the hearer has arrived at a combination of explicit content, context and implicatures which satisfies his expectations of relevance. In processing [the given example; J.J.], Peter may satisfy his expectations of relevance by only the implications in [a-d]. It follows that, contrary to the prediction of standard pragmatic models, he [...] may never derive the implication in [g] or derive a literal interpretation of Mary's utterance.” (p. 93). This explanation seems to me very similar to Max Black's ([1954] 1962) “filter”. Black compares a metaphorical expression to “a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear.” (Black 1962: 41) When interpreting the metaphorical expression only some attributes of – what Black calls – systems of associated commonplaces, i.e. commonplaces we associate e.g. with soldier, are relevant for interpreting the metaphorical expression, comparable with those attributes that lie on the clear lines of the glass, whereas attributes not associated while interpreting the expression lie behind the smoked glass. In my opinion, the problem of the RT approach (and of Black's) is the unidimensionality of the selection process proposed, which results in the uniqueness of the criteria of relevance (or in Black's ‘filter function’) for explaining selection. The approach proposed by Vega Moreno doesn't address that problem either. An alternative going beyond this unidimensionality would probably be Levinson's (2000) approach of heuristic interpretation. Levinson claims a set of hierarchically organized heuristics when interpreting, and therewith gets over one single criterion responsible for explaining the complex process of selection, as proposed by RT.

The second important argument of this book is what Vega Moreno calls “inferential routes and pragmatic routines”. The frequent use of utterances and their resulting familiarity allows minimizing the cognitive effort of a hearer, when repeatedly processing an inferential path. “Pragmatic routines are a kind of cognitive procedure that might be expected to develop given the Cognitive Principle of Relevance. Use of available pragmatic routines is encouraged by the Communicative Principle of Relevance since they make an utterance particularly easy to process in a way that is likely to satisfy expectations of relevance.” (p. 118). Satisfying expectations, not of relevance (as in RT) but of coordination problems in communication, is tied in Lewis ([1969] 2002) philosophical approach to convention, a primary category of linguistic units. Vega Moreno argues for the processing of familiar (linguistic) stimuli to develop routines for minimizing cognitive processing effort, and that this mechanism does not only apply to utterance interpretation but is rather a characteristic attribute of cognition. Apart from the cognitively interesting point, the development of pragmatic routines sheds light on the balance of conventionality and creativity of language use. This idea is also central to Nelson Goodman's (1976) theory of symbols. According to Goodman, *realism* of representation (contrary to *invention*) is a matter of a relationship between a system of representation and a standard system. Realistic representation (realism) is not a case of imitation or illusion, but of *inculcation*, which means that “realism is a matter of habit” (Goodman 1976:38). Under this perspective creativity and convention become floating boundaries which gradually appear through concrete language use. What Vega Moreno argues for being a cognitive procedure, sheds light on the symbolic procedures in a symbolic theory framework. Even for those primarily interested in the latter processes, Vega Moreno's ambitious book is an inspiring and absorbing reading.

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