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DEFAULT SEMANTICS: FOUNDATIONS
OF A COMPOSITIONAL THEORY
OF ACTS OF COMMUNICATION
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A number of approaches to language which try to combine semantics and pragmatics and treat them on an equal footing have been recently observed, e.g. in the inception of a new series of titles within a general framework known as ‘semantics/pragmatics interfaces’ (cf. Turner 1999). In the semantics/pragmatics programme offered by K. Jaszczolt, ‘dynamic representation of discourse’ and ‘intentional explanation of processing’ are combined in order to give an integrated theory of meaning, meaning which spans utterances (acts of communication), mental states (intentionality), as well as social and cultural components. Two main tenets of Jaszczolt’s *Default Semantics* are defined as follows: (1) “pragmatic input contributes to the truth conditions”; (2) “the theory of meaning of utterances and discourses is a *compositional, semantic theory*” (p. xvi). More specifically, the author claims that truth-conditional content is dictated not only by pragmatic inference (as advocated by relevance-oriented theories), but also by word meaning, sentence structure, as well as *default meanings* (cognitive and socio-cultural defaults), which are salient without contextual information, they are unreflective, spontaneous (automatic), and post-compositional. The underlying motif is that there is only one level of meaning stemming from different sources of information and, regardless of the source and type of information it undergoes contextual upgrading and, finally, semantization at the merger level, wherein the output products – merger representations – become “semantic equivalents of thoughts or conceptual structures” (p. 85), “theoretical constructs that ‘generalize’ over the strategies used by a hearer in interpreting the speaker’s act of communication” (p. 74).

The book consists of two parts. Fundamental issues related to semantics/pragmatics, such as meaning representation, semantic underspecification, or *what is said* (Chapter 1), variety of default meanings (Chapter 2), compositionality and

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merger representations (Chapter 3) proposed by the author as original ideas are presented in the first part. Applications of the theory of *Default Semantics* put forward and expounded theoretically in the introductory part are expounded in part II.

As K. Jaszczolt contends, studies on default meaning can be seen as an area of interest of (1) semantics, as treated by the Dynamic Representation Theory (Kamp and Reyle 1993) or its offshoot of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (Asher and Lascarides 2003); (2) pragmatics (Bach's implicature 1994); (3) socio-cultural aspects, as elaborated by Levinson (2000) and his presumptive meaning. The programme of *Default Semantics* (DS) is not immune to all four views, yet the author warns against identifying her ideas about *Default Semantics* with any of these.

Relatively close as DS is to DRT, it differs in the way that semantic underspecification is approached and in the importance ascribed to the grammatical component of meaning. In DRT privileged status is granted to grammar, as the level which processes utterances and dictates the logical form. Situational context and presumed meaning are facets which play a marginalized role; they are used only as minimal 'core meaning' embellishments. Contrary to DRT, DS identifies dynamic meaning with mental representations (p. 6), which, let us notice in passing, gives the view a cognitive flavour, since in line with Langacker's (1987) grammar meaning is conceptualization. Like other dynamic approaches to meaning, it puts grammar on a par with other vehicles of information. It also opts for the view that meaning flows from concepts as well as from discourse, which disambiguates any semantic underspecification of representation, therefore "there is no underspecification², there is no ambiguity either" and "there is no semantics/pragmatics boundary" (p. 8-9). On this view, meaning preserves compositionality and truth conditions are truth conditions of an utterance (as opposed to truth conditions of logical form being an output of the grammar of a sentence). Preserving compositionality, as part and parcel of the meaning/content, meaning does not emanate from speech acts as a discrete source, as advocated by Recanati's contextualism (2004), but it is engendered by what Jaszczolt calls 'acts of communication', which engulf both linguistic and non-linguistic strata. This brings us to a succinct definition of DS as "a compositional semantic theory of acts of communication" (p. 7).

Crucially, the utterance meaning that one arrives at does not spring solely from the analysis of its compositional parts, i.e. the process does not occur in a bottom-up fashion. In this respect DS runs counter to cognitive linguistics, which is more inclined to accept PDP, probabilistic models of information processing

² Underspecification is understood by Jaszczolt as a "semantic representation" which "does not fully represent the meaning of the utterance" (p. 10-11), and it is pitted against semantic underdetermination which "is a characteristic feature of the sentence: the output of the processing of the sentence" which "underdetermines the meaning of the utterance" (p. 10).

wherein, unlike in DS, composite elements are compositional (p. 96). Rather it is more *gestaltist*: by allowing for pragmatic inferences being a merger occurring in a top-down sequence, and, *ipso facto*, affecting its components (and in this respect DS, as noted by Jaszczolt (p.10), is compatible with Recanati). The build-up of representations in the merging processes is incremental, and the final output products – merger representations – are “abstractions, generalizations over thought” which are “more coarse-grained than thoughts” (p. 74) and which are not representations purely on a linguistic level (p. 82). In merger representations each source of information is non-compositional; compositionality is preserved only on the merger level (p. 98). The merger representation (MR; stage I) thus sums up the output of an interactionist processing of component elements of MR and, next – at stage II – it absorbs information coming from pragmatic aspects of an utterance (processing of implicatures), which is post-propositional and thus top-down.

DS discards concepts used in other dynamic approaches to meaning. For example, the ascription of a high status to the logical form (output of syntactic processing) is questioned on the grounds that it is only a theoretical construct which does not contribute to the processes of meaning construction, instead it is used for purely explanatory purposes. On Jaszczolt’s understanding, the concept of ‘what is said’ is also questioned as it is believed to be absorbed by merger representations. Levinson’s middle level of meaning, which he terms ‘utterance-type meaning’, contains default meanings, yet, as Jaszczolt (2007: 25) maintains, “defaults do not necessitate the *level* of defaults”, and thus she casts doubt on the need to postulate a separate, middle level of meaning.

Following the principle of the Parsimony of Levels (PoL), Jaszczolt distinguishes only one level of meaning which she calls merger representation – ‘thought-like object’ (p. 95), “more coarse-grained equivalents of thoughts” (p. 96) – a level which merges information from different sources of meaning, it is “the output of the process of composing meaning” (p. 49), “generalizations over thoughts” (p. 95). One source is default meaning, which is derivable neither from utterances nor from a sentence. Two types of defaults have been proposed: cognitive, and cultural-social. Cognitive defaults are universal interpretations, and Jaszczolt ascribes to them three possible degrees of intentions: (1) communicative, (2) informative (immersed in (1)), (3) referential. They represent the second principle of DS: the principle of Degrees of Intention (DI). No matter how strong or weak the intentions, the primary goal of every act of communication is securing some referent of an utterance, and this goal is elaborated in DS as the principle of Primary Intention (PI). Cultural and social defaults, on the other hand, are pre-inferential and stereotypical interpretations. Other components contributing to the level of merger representations include (1) conscious pragmatic inference and (2) combination of word meaning and sentence structure.

Before we continue with the description of these constitutes of merger representations, a few words are in order in connection with the compositional per-

spective on language processing postulated by DS. In psycholinguistic research on information (including language processing), two approaches can be distinguished. The older and more traditional, so to speak, is the modular, Fodorian, approach, which is believed to have close affinities with sequential processing. Examples of models which adhere to this line of reasoning are ample. Counterpoised to this approach are more recent models, which foster a radically different standpoint where information is processed in parallel, rather than sequentially, and it is distributed, which is against localist theories promoted by modularity. Jaszczolt explains that default meanings (social-cultural₂) emerge without conscious contextual processing, actually, they do not emerge before an utterance has been produced, they are thus not local but global and, in fact, post-propositional (and in this sense they are *gestaltist*, top-down). Put differently, it seems that in DS meaning is emergent in the sense that meaning follows from the interplay of the composite elements mentioned above (word and sentence meaning, defaults). If this claim is true, then DS is congenial to cognitive linguistics (CL), albeit in accordance with CL properties are emergent by virtue of probabilistic (bottom-up) processing. It also transpires that DS inclines to parallel processing of composite elements which contribute to its output, i.e. merger representation. This contention pushes DS towards CL, which inclines to PDP models of information processing. Another similarity between DS and CL is their conceptual level of analysis, linked to merger representations (MR) in the case of DS and conceptual meaning in the case of CL, with one difference that while CL speaks for some abstracted meaning at this level, i.e. about schemas, DS insists on 'generalizations over thought'. It is not unlikely that what CL defines as image-schemas might bear close resemblance to MR in DS; what both programmes assign to semantics is the conceptual level of analysis. Finally, because DS assumes two *stages* of processing as mentioned above – processing of the truth conditional content and processing of implicatures – it seems that DS straddles the boundary between sequential and distributed processing models.

Returning now to compositionality, Jaszczolt views truth conditions as true in the sense of denotation, leading to the conclusion that if one adheres to this assumption then compositionality is a *content* principle rather than just a methodological construct used in model-theoretical frameworks. Jaszczolt understands content very broadly, i.e. as one which does not only engulf the (semantic) content predicted of denotation (truth conditional semantics) but also of utterances (truth conditional pragmatics), and which is not only compositional at linguistic level, but also goes beyond purely linguistic sources, hence Jaszczolt calls it meta-compositionality (p. 83). Put differently, in line with Default Semantics "truth conditions are predicated of *representations of content*", wherein semantics eschews being discussed solely under the rubric of compositional semantics, rather the representations reflect content immersed in context, so to speak, "the semantics of acts of communication" (p. 76).

Another interesting problem tackled by Jaszczolt in connection with compositionality is the ontological status of the composite elements which constitute the merger level. She presents two polar views on this matter and sets DS mid-way. One view necessitates the components being independent of context (Fodor and Lepore 2001) and the other, postulated by Horwich's deflationism (1998), models meaning on use. While the first one excludes the 'meaning is use' approach, the latter one is corroborated by usage and pragmatic context.

Like other theories (Lewis 1986, Stalnaker 1978), DS promotes a doxastic perspective on the existence of possible worlds being necessary in the evaluation of merger representations. Unlike other theories, however, the possible worlds create a context-set which is *not* changing, because "representations in Default Semantics are representations of discourse processing, not conversational competence". Hence DS "does not define meaning as having context-change potential" (p. 86). Truth-conditional pragmatics thus relies on a 'static' vision of the epistemology of meaning, wherein meaning is emergent and dynamic yet not in a completely unrestricted fashion. However, DS also stresses that "conscious pragmatic inferences₁ (...) are not deductive" and they "cannot be guaranteed to be preserved with the growth of context" yet "they are defeasible" (p. 98). Therefore, it seems that the approach to meaning postulated by DS is dynamic but only to a point. It is also a radical move towards pragmatics, but, again, to a point: going further towards pragmatics is undesirable because it would "equate meaning with inferential role" (p. 98). This is exactly what DS tries to avoid (by promoting commitment to a pragmatic inference *regardless of* the growing and changing discourse), and what is promoted by relevance-oriented theories (e.g. Levinson 2000, Carston 2002). In simple terms, meaning is subject to contextual overlay, i.e. is open to revision (defeasible), but not without any limitations, as some (semantic and cognitive) anchoring is necessary, i.e. context is not the only source of meaning. As an example of a semantics/pragmatics interface framework, DS thus remains a semantics which is dynamic and pragmatics-rich rather than a pragmatics which semantics-rich.

Part II of the book presents applications of the theory of DS to the analysis of definite descriptions (Chapter 4), prepositional attitude reports (Chapter 5), futurity and English *will* (Chapter 6), presupposition as anaphora (Chapter 7), sentential connectives (Chapter 8), and number terms (Chapter 9). The section on definite descriptions comprises default readings of referential and attributive uses of proper nouns, pronouns and demonstratives. The author suggests that a binary division of directly referring expressions (type-referential) and contextually-referring expressions (token-referential) exhibits ambiguity, and *a fortiori*, the referential and non-referential reading is governed by the pragmatic context. Propositional attitude reports examined by means of tools available in DS are believed to "retain intentional objects", which would not be permissible in other accounts built on sentence structure compositionality (instead of post-merger

compositionality). Futurity encoded by *will* is analysed in terms of three aspects: as an indicator of tense, modality, and "a marker that is ambiguous between the two" (p. 147). The discussion leads Jaszczolt to conclude that all the three aspects of *will* can be satisfactorily explained by making reference to modality, which is believed to be a concept overarching the above-mentioned meanings. Thus, the very intriguing claim Jaszczolt makes is this: it is modality, or to be more precise degrees of modality (certainty, evidence, acceptability), that is responsible for the three readings of *will*. In line with DS, presupposition should be analysed in terms of anaphora on the grounds that both anaphora and presupposition succumb to binding; in the case of presupposition binding refers to the expression antecedent to the utterance in question. Sentential connectives (*and, or, if, not, etc.*) can be treated as truth-functional operators employed in propositional logic. As for number terms, DS sees the default reading in 'exactly', and non-default meaning in 'at least', 'approximately' and the like.

Default Semantics is an interesting and important voice in the currently debated semantics/pragmatics interface problem, which, methodologically alluding to Discourse Representation Theory formalism, dwells on its own original programme.

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