

# Intentions in Utterance Interpretation

Palle Leth<sup>1,2</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden  
palle. leth@philosophy. su. se

<sup>2</sup> Institut Jean-Nicod, Paris, France

**Abstract.** Which is the role of intentions in utterance interpretation? I sketch an argument to the effect that the role of intentions is indirect; the interpreter's assignment of meaning rather depends on considerations of what meaning is most reasonably assigned and her interest. This approach often results in the assignment of intended meaning, but might also result in the assignment of non intended meaning. I consider the three basic options offered to the interpreter when, in the course of the conversation, she is confronted with further evidence about the speaker's intention.

**Keywords:** Intentions · Utterance interpretation · Semantics/pragmatics · Conversational interaction

## 1 Introduction

Which is the role of intentions in utterance interpretation? It is often assumed that once the decoding of conventional meaning has yielded its result – truth conditions or schemata for further enrichment – the goal of interpretation is the recovery of speaker intentions. Here I will present an alternative picture to the effect that the contextualist all things considered establishment of meaning, even though involving considerations about speaker intentions, is best conceived as aiming at the most reasonably assigned meaning and crucially depends on the interpreter's interest. The approach often results in the assignment of intended meaning, but may also result in the assignment of non intended meaning. The most reasonably assigned meaning may or may not correspond to intended meaning; in the latter case, the utterance may or may not, according to the interpreter's interest, be erased by her. I will consider the interpreter's options when in the course of the conversation she is confronted with further evidence about the speaker's intended meaning.

## 2 The Regular Course of Interpretation

Many theorists take for granted that the goal of utterance interpretation is the recovery of the speaker's intended meaning. At the same time it is pointed out that a speaker cannot mean whatever she wants by an utterance. Many theorists hold that conformity to conventions is constitutive of speaker meaning and that in cases of divergence between conventional and intended meaning, conventional meaning wins out [1–3].

From a contextualist point of view, which I will here adopt, what matters to speaker meaning is not conformity to conventional meaning as such, but the speaker's making the interpreter able to figure out her intended meaning in some way or other. Conformity to conventions is one means, but there are all sorts of cues which can be exploited by the speaker [4]. This suggests that the meaning of an utterance is the meaning intended by the speaker, provided that the speaker sees to it that her intended meaning be the meaning most reasonably assigned to the utterance by the interpreter.

The interpreter approaches an utterance with the aim of making reasonable sense of it. This means that she is prepared to go beyond or against conventional meaning whenever she is so invited by the absurdity of the conventional meaning, the preceding discourse, what she knows about the speaker's attitude and aims, her background assumptions, the common ground of the conversation, the requirements of cooperation, considerations of what is interesting and relevant. All things considered, what is the most reasonable meaning to assign to this utterance in this context?

The notion of most reasonably assigned meaning is certainly quite vague. Such a notion makes a component of meaning a matter of all things considered consideration [5], discussion, argument, even dispute, in short a matter not of decoding but of decision. Which contextual cues are available? What is included in the common ground? What is reasonably taken into consideration?

The interpreter is not directly concerned with the speaker's actual intention, but with the meaning which manifests itself given all sorts of contextual factors. There is nevertheless a natural connection with the speaker's intended meaning in so far as the interpreter has every reason to assume that what she takes to be the most reasonably assigned meaning coincides with the speaker's intended meaning. The interpreter believes that the speaker in order to get her meaning across relies on the contextual factors which she takes into consideration when assigning meaning. The reason why the interpreter believes that she has arrived at the speaker's intended meaning is not some access to the speaker's mind, but that she has no reason to suppose that what is the most reasonably assigned meaning is not the intended meaning.

In the regular course of interpretation, the goal is to establish, all things considered, the most reasonably assigned meaning. The question is not what the speaker's intention is, but what is conveyed by a certain utterance in a certain context. Speakers trust interpreters will go beyond conventional meaning and interpreters trust speakers intentions are conform to most reasonably assigned meaning [6].

### 3 Cases of Divergence Between Intended and Assigned Meaning

It may happen of course that the speaker fails to make her intention manifest, so that there is a divergence between what is most reasonably taken to be the meaning of the utterance by the interpreter and the meaning actually intended by the speaker. Philosophers imagine such failures, but do not reflect upon the conversational interaction following upon such failures [7, 8]. Linguists are much more interested in clarifications and corrections, but do not seem to consider the variety and the reasons for the options offered to the interpreter when confronted with further evidence about the speaker's

intention. There seems to be a tendency to take for granted that speaker initiated repairs are always accepted by the interpreter [9]. The consideration of the interpreter's dealing with evidence about intentions in cases of divergence will contribute to determining the role of intentions in interpretation.

Let us look at the case invented by Kaplan:

Suppose that without turning and looking I point to the place on my wall which has long been occupied by a picture of Rudolf Carnap and I say: [That] is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. But unbeknownst to me, someone has replaced my picture of Carnap with one of Spiro Agnew [10].

Philosophers discuss whether a false statement of the picture of Agnew [10, 11] or a true statement of the picture of Carnap or no statement is made in this case [12]. It seems to me that the question if or what a statement is made should be asked with respect to the interpretive strategies in the subsequent conversational interaction. The statement made depends upon kinds of action on the interpreter's part. Let us look at a possible continuation of the conversation.

- S: That is the picture of the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.  
 I: I did not know Spiro Agnew was the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.  
 S: Spiro Agnew? No, I meant Rudolf Carnap. *Turning around.* Someone must have replaced the Carnap picture.  
 I: Yes, Carnap was a great philosopher.

Let us assume that the interpreter takes the picture of Spiro Agnew to be the value of the demonstrative, because at the time of the utterance this seems to her to be the most reasonably assigned meaning, all things considered. The speaker's reaction to her reply provides her with further evidence as to the intended meaning. The sequence above is compatible with two different interpretive strategies.

First, the interpreter may reconsider her meaning assignment. For instance, she may recall that actually a picture of Carnap used to occupy the spot of the wall where there is now a picture of Agnew. This may convince her that the meaning she assigned was not the meaning most reasonably assigned. It would have been reasonable to consider this piece of common ground when assigning a meaning to the utterance. In short, the interpreter would blame herself for having made the wrong interpretation and correct her meaning assignment.

Even though the plausibility of such a line of interpretation may not be entirely convincing in the case at hand, I believe it is not too difficult in general to imagine cases where the interpreter, in the face of further evidence of the speaker's intention, reconsiders her interpretation and agrees with the speaker that the most reasonable interpretation is the one intended by the speaker. The interpreter says to herself: "This is how, upon consideration, I should have taken the speaker's utterance."

Another option for the interpreter is to consider that at the time of utterance, the meaning assignment she made actually was the most reasonably assigned meaning. She has no reason to reconsider the interpretation she made and she proceeds at no correction. The speaker is to blame for not having made her intention apparent. Upon being informed that the speaker's intention was actually to refer to a picture of Rudolf Carnap, she is however prepared to erase the utterance made by the speaker and, as it were, replace it

with an utterance to the effect that Rudolf Carnap was one the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. The interpreter says to herself: “This is not at all – all things considered – what the speaker said, but never mind, I now see what the speaker wanted to say.”

These two procedures may occur silently and may not be outwardly visible, as in the conversation above, but are nevertheless distinct in that they originate in different judgments. In reinterpretation the mistake is with the interpreter, when erasure and replacement occur the mistake is with the speaker.

In the former case, the speaker succeeds after all in communicating her intention. In the latter case, she fails. I do not think that the fact that the most reasonably assigned meaning is not intended by the speaker makes it the case that the most reasonably assigned meaning is not the meaning of the utterance (unlike [12] for example). But new evidence concerning the intended meaning may constitute a reason for the interpreter to erase the utterance and replace it with a novel one, in line with what the further evidence suggests to her. According to this conception, it makes sense to speak of the meaning of an utterance only from the viewpoint of an interpreter’s assigning a meaning to it.

However, these two options are not exhaustive. The interpreter is not obliged to refuse an utterance which from the speaker’s point of view is infelicitous in that the most reasonable meaning assigned to the utterance does not correspond to her intended meaning. The interpreter may deliberately preserve the utterance and hold the speaker responsible for the meaning most reasonably assigned to it even though she does not believe that the speaker intended this meaning. Why would the interpreter take an interest in assigning non intended meaning? Is not utterance interpretation always in the service of speaker intentions?

Let us go back to Kaplan’s case again and modify it somewhat. Unbeknownst to the speaker, the picture of Carnap has been replaced with, not a picture of Agnew, but a nice-looking painting. Without turning and looking the speaker points to the place of the wall now occupied by the painting and says: “That is your birthday present.”

Let us suppose that at the time of utterance, the most reasonable meaning assigned to the utterance is a statement to the effect that the speaker has bestowed the nice-looking painting upon the interpreter. The interpreter may later come across further evidence concerning the speaker’s intentions in making that utterance which makes it clear that the speaker intended to give her a picture of Carnap. However, she is not prepared to erase the utterance and replace it with one to the effect that the speaker had given a picture of Rudolf Carnap to her, simply because the original utterance is advantageous to her. The interpreter has an interest in refusing to erase it. We may imagine further cases, involving for example implicatures, slurs and offensive talk where interpreters would not be willing to erase utterances failing to convey the intended meaning. The interpreter has an interest in holding the speaker responsible not for what she wanted to convey, but for the meaning most reasonably assigned to her utterance.

What lead up to the interpreter’s meaning assignments are considerations involving not only the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered, but all sorts of contextual factors. This approach to utterance interpretation does not have as a consequence that only intended meaning is assigned. Upon being informed that the most reasonably

assigned meaning does not correspond to the intended meaning, the interpreter may not withdraw her meaning assignment, if she has an interest – which may be rather private or rather general in character – in preserving it, using it for her own purposes, as it were. The justification of the interpreter's interpretation crucially depends on the legitimacy of not erasing the utterance and on the reasonableness of the meaning assigned. Both issues are matters of discussion and argumentation and are settled only within the community of interpreters.

## 4 Conclusion

The interpreter sets out to establish the most reasonably assigned meaning. In the regular course of interpretation she has every reason to believe that this meaning is the speaker's intended meaning. In cases of divergence between the assigned meaning and intended meaning, the interpreter may reconsider her interpretation of the utterance or erase and replace it or preserve it for her own purposes. The interpreter is generally interested in assigning intended meaning, but that does not imply that she is only interested in assigning intended meaning. An utterance means what the speaker means, provided that her intended meaning is the meaning most reasonably assigned. An utterance means what the interpreter takes it to mean, provided that her assigned meaning is the meaning most reasonably assigned.

## References

1. Dummett, M.: A nice derangement of epitaphs: some comments on Davidson and Hacking. In: Le Pore, E. (ed.) *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, pp. 459–476. Blackwell, Oxford (1986)
2. Green, K.: Davidson's derangement: of the conceptual priority of language. *Dialectica* **55**(3), 239–258 (2001)
3. Reimer, M.: What malapropisms mean: a reply to Donald Davidson. *Erkenntnis* **60**(3), 317–334 (2004)
4. Davidson, D.: A nice derangement of epitaphs. In: Davidson, D. (ed.) *Truth, Language, and History*, pp. 89–107. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2005)
5. Gauker, C.: Zero tolerance for pragmatics. *Synthese* **165**(3), 359–371 (2008)
6. Akman, V.: Rethinking context as a social construct. *J. Pragmat.* **32**, 743–759 (2000)
7. Barwise, J.: On the circumstantial relation between meaning and content. In: *The Situation in Logic*, pp. 59–77. Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford (1989)
8. Wilson, D., Sperber, D.: Truthfulness and relevance. *Mind* **111**(443), 583–632 (2002)
9. Ginzburg, J.: *The Interactive Stance*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2012)
10. Kaplan, D.: Dthat. In: Yourgrau, P. (ed.) *Demonstratives*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (1990)
11. Reimer, M.: Three views of demonstrative reference. *Synthese* **93**(3), 373–402 (1992)
12. King, J.C.: Speaker intentions in context. *Noûs* **48**(2), 219–237 (2014)