

Intersubjectivity as Co-phenomenology: From the Holism of Meaning to the Being-in-the-world-with-others

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Abstract I outline in this paper a pragmatological approach to meaning. Meaning is defined as a phenomenologically experienced construal. As such, it is a dynamic object whose first evidence comes from the first person rather than the third one. At the same time, the approach assumes that meaning is not an individual creation, but rather an intersubjective one. Origins of meaning are also to be founded not ‘in the head’ of a cognitive system or subject, but in the intersubjective space contingently formed between a subject (S), an other (O) and a common object (R), which they talk about. Approaching this minimal communicative situation therefore requires realizing that the phenomenological dimension is always implied in any intersubjective encounter. The observed synchronized co-feeling among subjects, upon which language comprehension takes place, I call ‘co-phenomenology’. When analyzed in this way, intersubjectivity shows at the same time its social, phenomenological and biological dimensions.

Keywords Intersubjectivity · Holism · Co-phenomenology · Meaning · Pragmatics

Introduction: Meaning, Context and Holism

Classical cognitive approaches conceive meaning as an intrinsic property of certain linguistic forms. According to this hypothesis, words have meanings in themselves: They mean what they mean due to their meanings, which are independent of subject and context. Nonetheless, empirical evidence and theoretical arguments speak against the idea of ‘meaning-in-itself’ (Cornejo 2004). For instance, according to the mental-lexicon-hypothesis the semantic processing takes place independent on the context where words appear. However, studies about the time-course of language comprehension show that meaning is early and highly sensible to the context of use.

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Persons are always relating new words with the immediately precedent discursive context (Van Berkum et al. 1999; Van Berkum et al. 2003). Previous sentences influence expectancy on posterior words in wakefulness and even in sleep, by modulating the N400 component (Ibáñez et al. 2006).

There are also macro-contextual aspects of the communication situation which have influence on the meaning comprehension. For example, we evaluated if induced different interpretative strategies persons influences the meaning comprehension (Cornejo et al. 2007). Studying irony comprehension, we framed the experimental task either with a *holistic* problem solving approach or with an *analytical* one. Holistic strategy—intuitive and contextually dependent—performs better on the behavioral measures when distinguishing ironies from non-sense expressions, and its electrophysiological correlates show clearly a larger contextual sensitivity. The same linguistic stimuli produce completely different cognitive responses depending on the specific *purpose* the person pursues according to a general mode to approach the activity in course.

These and many other studies highlight the contextual and pragmatic nature of linguistic meaning. Global situation, world knowledge, personal disposition, gestures, micro- and macro-contextual information seem to impact meaning neither marginally nor lately, but crucially and constantly. Empirical findings demonstrate recurrently that something like a *pure* lexical processing of semantic units is an idealization. The manifold influences of the context upon the language are not solely indicating that both ‘meaning-in-itself’ and context are more coordinated than thought. Such evidence is instead suggesting a more radical interpretation, namely that context and language are imbricated in a unique holistic totality of sense. Context impacts crucially and constantly language comprehension just because language is a kind of action, and as such, is part of the organismic totality of human being. Meaning is better understood as a dynamic construal, an evolving process highly sensitive to the context of language use. Rather than insist in detaching language pieces and a fortiori to assume these have meaning in themselves, it makes sense to think of language as action, which, like bodily gestures, deploys content upon a background of meaning.

In what follows I outline an alternative way to approach meaning. Assuming that language is a kind of action, I consider the often forgotten phenomenological dimension of meaning, while making explicit the traditional prejudice against phenomenology in psychology. This movement allows conciliating the socio-pragmatic with the phenomenological dimensions of meaning, by anchoring it within an anthropological situation—the minimal communicative situation—rather than a metaphysical stance—such as the mental lexicon or the history spirit.

Linguistic Action and Meaning Background

Language and gestures are part of the repertoire of actions that human beings bring about and encounter in their world so far they are alive. Since human actions are also always situated, language pieces are never processed from scratch, as if it was irrelevant who utter them and in what context. There is a background of meaning upon which language and context are permanently integrated and made coherent,

what turns language meaningful. As consequence, words do not carry meaning in themselves; they rather presuppose it. Words, like gestures, help to direct the holist process of meaning construction, but they do not transport it. We are accordingly advancing toward a holist conception of meaning: There is an experiential substratum of sense which precedes in real time the language comprehension. Theories assuming isolated linguistic meanings—and, incidentally, isolated gesture meanings—will probably not work until they take seriously into account this typically human, general sense of being in the world. This substratum provides a sense of continuity to the action, crossing over sensorial, motor and cognitive processes (Hörmann 1986).

The holistic nature of meaning represents a conclusion to which converge at least two contemporaries thought streams: postanalytic philosophy and the psychology of totality. Following Davidson's radical interpretation thesis (2001), an important segment of present day post-analytical philosophy argues that meaning can approximately be interpreted when language is examined within a specific, situated context. Language becomes part of a more complex social action, so that meanings should not be searched in supposed mental entities, but rather in an interpretable, socially intertwined coordination. On the other hand, *Ganzheitspsychologie* has advocated from the beginning of twentieth century the permanently evolving character of meaning (Diriwächter 2004). In this framework, meaning takes root in the human mode of being, described from a vitalist point of view as *on becoming* rather than a static object. Thus, comprehension never stops and meanings are always in the process of becoming something different.

However, this might sound as supporting a new form of subjectivism, leading to the improbable conclusion that meaning is a strictly personal creation. Arguments of this sort are usually raised whenever phenomenological aspects of meaning are mentioned. For example, they are characteristic of some contemporary forms of cultural psychology rooted into Russian thought. Hereby they inherit the materialist criticisms upon any form of 'individual' meaning, since such understanding of human action presupposes a socially isolated, immaterial starting point for social life. But extending such materialist skepticism to phenomenological aspects of meaning implies confounding individual experience with a particular way to theorize it, namely, the Cartesian view of mind (Cornejo 2006, 2007). From the fact human experience exists, it does not follow its existence is a priori or independent on social conventions.

In order to solve this apparent conflict, we have to take into account that meaning is a phenomenologically experienced construal, but an intersubjectively shared one. As soon as we realize meaning involves an intersubjective dimension, we are in fact dealing with an epistemically objective dimension (Searle 1994). Meaning can not be adequately described as a private phenomenon—be this a static representation or a dynamical stream—, since it is also a social process. Meaning is not an individual creation, but rather an intersubjective creation, considering that the specific form that ongoing meaning construction adopts makes use of socially internalized resources (Valsiner and Van der Veer 2000). The social language becomes so integrated to our inner life, that we cannot trace a division line between the public and the private language: "How could I intend to walk between the pain and the expression of pain"? (Wittgenstein 1953, §245).

The Minimal Communicative Situation

Origins of (linguistic) meaning are therefore to be founded not ‘in the head’ of a cognitive system or an socially isolated subject, but in the intersubjective space contingently formed between a subject (S), an other (O) and a common object (R), which they are talking about. This triadic *minimal communicative situation* constitutes the anthropological situation where meaning construals emerge, crystallizes, and are permanently modified. It represents the core of any pragmatic theory of language, either explicitly—as in Bühler (1934), Davidson (2001) or Quine (1960)—, or implicitly—as in Peirce (1931–1935) and the late Wittgenstein (Fig. 1).

A minimal communicative situation circumscribes the meaning construction process in micro-social interactions. It involves: the phenomenological experience of Speaker and Hearer; a social interaction between them; and an environmentally situated Reference. Approaching the minimal communicative situation therefore requires realizing that the phenomenological dimension is always implied in any intersubjective encounter. Intersubjectivity analyses usually ignore this point: Language comprehension is produced if and only if a *common experiencing* exists. Consequently, intersubjectivity is here defined as the space when we are being-in-the-world-with-others. It requires the triadic convergence among a shared phenomenological experiencing between two persons on a common world. Thus, language comprehension is produced if and only if a common experiencing between Speaker and Hearer exists. This co-experiencing the common world we are dwelling in is usually traceable in a synchronized co-feeling among subjects. I call *co-phenomenology* the common feeling we are experiencing with others as consequence of our inalienable sense of being-in-the-world.

Why We Do Not Need a Theory to Understand Others

It is crucial to note that locating meaning construction in a triadic minimal communicative situation (Speaker, Hearer, World) should not be interpreted as

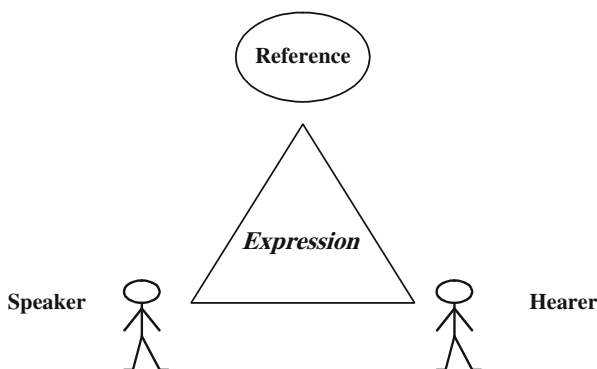


Fig. 1 The Minimal Communicative Situation, containing the three essential components of any pragmatic approach to language comprehension and language acquisition: Speaker, Hearer and Reference. Note that the upper element is an Object, not a *representation* of it (neither conceptual nor linguistic): this is the difference between a pragmatic approach to language and a discursivist one

implying that intersubjective spaces are confluences of epistemically encapsulated subjects. This idea has become increasingly popular thanks to the Theory of Mind research program (e.g. Tomasello 1999). In such approach, human cognition emerges from the development of a theory about the mentality of other humans, under the assumption that at certain developmental stage appears the insight that other humans have their own beliefs, thoughts, and intentions, whose understanding help to understand their behaviors.

But when we consider seriously the phenomenological dimension of human interaction we rapidly discover that formulating theories is neither the basic form of being-in-the-world nor the starting point of the whole human development. It is in fact amply accepted in phenomenological thought the distinction between two kinds of phenomenological understanding: availableness and occurrentness (Heidegger 1927/1962). On the one hand, we have the ability understanding entities and essences, i.e. understanding things which are ‘present-at-hand’ [*Vorhandensein*]. This kind of knowledge is knowledge *of* the world and it requires a reflective attitude. On the other hand, we have the skill to understand instruments and signs as ready-at-hand [*Zuhandensein*], i.e. knowledge *in* the world. For Heidegger, this kind of knowledge is produced by a natural attitude in the world, so that he considered it as the fundamental mode of the being-in-the-world [*Dasein*].

This fundamental differentiation has been constantly present throughout twentieth century. The same core idea is in fact suggested by the differentiation between ‘I’ and ‘me’ by James (1890) and later by G.H. Mead (1934); Bergson’s distinction between an analytic and an intuitive knowledge (Bergson 1903/1913); Husserl’s concept of ‘world of life’ [*Lebenswelt*] in opposition to the scientific knowledge (Husserl 1937/1970); Merleau-Ponty’s primacy of perception over cognition (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962); Ryle’s classical distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that* (Ryle 1949); M. Polanyi’s *subsidiary consciousness* versus *focal consciousness* (Polanyi 1964); J.J. Gibson’s concept of *direct perception* (Gibson 1986); and more recently, the *presentational* and *representational* cognitive levels (Shanon 1993); *nuclear self* and *autobiographical self* (Damasio 1999); among many others.

Since sharing an experiencing about the common world does not occur by way of a reflective explanation of our respective viewpoints, co-phenomenology cannot be a *theory*. It is rather the basic mode of being-there-with-others. Since it is a pre-reflexive mode of being-in-the-world, it corresponds to a *presentational* knowledge, not a *representational* one (Shanon 1993). Insofar I am not set over against the world I am dwelling in, persons I *environmentally* encounter do not appear in my visual field as enigmas to be resolved. In natural circumstances I am not *in front of* others as they were objects being-present-at-hand. Instead, we usually are actively engaged *with them* in common activities, so that their behaviors seem us pristine and full-fledged of meaning. Within the minimal communicative situation, the other is from the start available, not present-at-hand.

Thus, when I argue that meaning is not a set of contents, but a lively phenomenological experience, I am not hypostasizing mental representations to explain human behavior. The term ‘phenomenological dimension’ designs the ample domain of what is ‘ontologically subjective’ (Searle 1994), which is not to be reduced to their products, i.e. the representations. Meaning is experience in the broad sense that it is basically a *felt* experiencing and therefore directly perceived from a

first person perspective. It cannot be a theoretical representation, but rather an open-ended, evolving presentational construction, deeply rooted into our bodies and our tacit knowledge. Representations are ulterior forms from this substratum of life, not its starting point. In addition, conceiving meaning as experience leads to anchor meaning to a certain organismic being-in-the-world, so that meaning is always a situated phenomenon, not detached from context and interactional circumstances. Meaning is contextualized precisely as consequence to be part of a holistic form of being-in-the-world.

However, meaning is not only experience in the world, but experience *with others*. We are from the outset sharing a world, so that we do not need in normal circumstances deciphering the intentions of the other. From a pragmatist point of view, the hearer (H) knows—charitatively or collaboratively, what the other (S) is probably intending, just because Speaker and Hearer are sharing an ample and complex non-linguistic background knowledge, which allows for collaborative referring. When we are dwelling in the same world, we tend to feel with others and as the others feel. The co-experiencing can be noted not only from the first person viewpoint, but also from the third person. In this sense, objective measures of synchronic co-experience can be observed at different levels. For example, evidence from neural activity indicates robustly the existence of groups of neurons in primate ventral premotor cortex which discharge not only when the monkey executes goal-directed actions—be with hands, mouth or tools—but when it observes the same actions performed by others humans or non-humans (Ferrari et al. 2005; Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). Similar motor resonance has been observed in human action and language comprehension (Glenberg and Kaschak 2002), suggesting that language comprehension does imply activation of motor and perceptual dispositions, rather than abstract representations (Zwaan and Taylor 2006). At a behavioral level, it has coherently been found to exhibit “interactional synchrony”, involving complex coordinations in speech and gestures among participants of conversations (Grant and Spivey 2003; Shockley et al. 2003). In addition, some studies show that empathic interactions correlate with coordination in autonomic signals such as heart rate and skin conductance (Eisenberg et al. 1996).

Conclusions

I have outlined a pragmatist view of meaning, conceiving it as part of the holistic experience of human being-in-the-world. This move allow better to understand the pervasive effect of context upon meaning comprehension. In this framework meaning emerges in triadic situations, where a common experiencing emerges among persons when being in the same world. The term ‘co-phenomenology’ underlines the fact that meaning comprehension is only possible when people are sharing similar experiencing as result of their being-in-the-world. In this sense, meaning exists before we represent it as an object present-at-hand. We could obtain rich new information about language acquisition, language comprehension, learning, and meaning changes if we look more closely at the minimal communicative situation. When analyzed in this way, meaning deploys at the same time its social, phenomenological and biological dimensions.

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