

Speaker intentions and semantic content

Long abstract

Speaker intentions play an important role in contemporary theories of communication. For one thing, they feature in a widespread view of how communication in general proceeds: a speaker intends to communicate a proposition to a certain audience; she uses expressions to make this intention accessible to her audience; and communication is successful if the audience recognises the speaker's communicative intention and as a result entertains the intended proposition. On this Gricean picture, speaker intentions determine the content an utterance *communicates*.

A second and equally popular way in which speaker intentions are put to use in theories of communication is as determinants of the *semantic* content of many indexical expressions. The semantic content of anaphoric and demonstrative expressions as well as of quantifiers and gradable adjectives is commonly thought of as *intention-sensitive*. Consider the following examples:

- (1) Amy knows my sister. She is an actress.
- (2) *Pointing at a man*: 'That's the chairman.
- (3) *Gesturing at items in a shelf*: Everything is handmade.
- (4) *In a conversation about basketball players*: Bill is tall.

Most semanticists (e.g. King and Stanley (2005), Stokke (2010)) hold that in each of these utterances the speakers' intentions determine the semantic content of the respective indexical expression. In (1) and (2), it is claimed, they determine reference, in (3) how the domain of the quantifier is restricted and in (4) what the comparison class of the tallness relation is.

I will argue that this latter view is mistaken: speaker intentions should not be taken to determine semantic content. Focussing on gradable adjectives, I will present a number of cases in which positing semantically relevant speaker intentions is not only theoretically unnecessary but also implausible. These cases suggest that, in general, speaker intentions determine the communicated, but not the semantic content of an utterance.

I will begin by outlining two ways in which speaker intentions are built into semantic theories. Some theorists assume that speakers have two distinct types of intentions when making an utterance: a) intentions to communicate a certain proposition (henceforth *communicative intentions*) and b) intentions directed at the semantic content of the

expressions uttered (henceforth *semantic intentions*). Others invoke *only* communicative intentions, but let these do double duty in determining both the communicated and the semantic content of an utterance.

The first approach, I will argue, suffers from two problems, which can be summarised as follows. Firstly, it requires speakers to be vastly over-sophisticated. If speakers have semantic intentions, they must be either directed at (the semantic content of) individual expressions (or phrases) or at (the semantic content) of whole sentences (or clauses). The latter is implausible: a speaker might set off uttering a long sentence without knowing how she is going to finish it, and still she can successfully communicate. In that case, she cannot have intentions directed at the semantic content of the whole sentence. But the former is also implausible: compositional semantics is a complex matter, and most competent speakers will not know what the content of an individual expression is contributing to the content communicated. Still, they can successfully communicate. This is a first reason to doubt that speakers have semantic intentions.

A second problem for an approach invoking semantic intentions is that in many cases such intentions seem to be freewheeling. Successful communication requires a speaker to have a communicative intention and a hearer to recognise this intention. Most of the time, an additional semantic intention would be doing no theoretical work. Consider John uttering (4):

(4) Bill is tall.

If John intends to communicate that Bill is tall for a basketball player by uttering (4), and if his audience recognises this intention and therefore comes to entertain that Bill is tall for a basketball player, then there is little reason to assume that John has an additional semantic intention, and that his audience recognises this additional intention. It may appear that semantic intentions are needed when the semantic and the communicative content of an utterance diverge, e.g. in non-literal speech. But that, too, is implausible. Consider an utterance of (5):

(5) Greece is shouldering a heavy burden of debt.

Neither does a speaker need to have an intention that the content of “heavy” comes with a particular comparison class when uttering (5), nor will a hearer be able to recognise such an intention. Still, (5) can be used for successful communication, so semantic intentions are theoretically idle. Semantic intentions are therefore not the way to go.

I will then argue against the second approach, according to which communicative intentions determine both the communicated and the semantic content of an utterance. The main problem for this approach is that often there are many different semantic contents that are compatible with a single communicative intention. It is thus arbitrary which semantic content a communicative intention determines. This is demonstrated by an utterance of (5), where there are a number of semantic contents (with different comparison classes for “heavy”) that would suffice to communicate that Greece has high debt. And even if one such content were determined, a hearer would not be able to make out this content; once again, the speaker intentions do no theoretical lifting.

While the main part of my talk will deal with gradable adjectives, I will show that similar considerations apply to allegedly intention-sensitive referential expressions. Here is an example. In a lecture on 18th century philosophy, Sam points at a picture of Kant and utters (6), meaning to communicate what is given by (6.1):

(6) In 1797, she published the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

(6.1) In 1797, Kant published the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

It seems likely he will be understood correctly. Does “she” refer to Kant in (6)? If it is part of the meaning of “she” that who is thereby referred to is female, then this seems unlikely. Again, the semantic content of an expression commonly thought of as intention-sensitive does not appear to be determined by the speaker’s communicative intention. I will thus conclude that if speaker intentions (whether semantic or communicative) are not necessary to determine semantic content for referential expressions and gradable adjectives, which are prime candidates for intentions-sensitive content, then it might be best to keep intentions out of semantics in general.

I will end by discussing alternatives to intention-sensitive semantics. A theory that replaces speaker intentions with salient features of the context (such as that defended by McGinn (1981)) suffers from similar defects as those mentioned above. The examples presented thus speak in favour of a minimal theory of semantic content that sees no influence of speaker intentions or context on the semantic content of most expressions. I will show how such a view (variations of which are held by Borg (2004), Cappelen & Lepore (2005) and Bach (1994)) can deal with the examples.

References

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