

WALTHER KINDT

Word Semantics and Conversational Analysis*

0. At first glance there do not seem to be important links between word semantics and conversational analysis, since perspectives and methods applied in these two research areas differ so much. The following remarks concerning my own research interests will hopefully make it easier to understand my specific views on this matter.

In the beginning of my research in linguistics I worked within the fields of logical semantics and analytical methodology. Hence, I did not develop a natural inclination for applying interpretive methods¹ as they are used in current conversational analysis. In contradistinction to other linguists, however, I always argued for the development of an empirically oriented semantics.

At this time I dealt with theoretical problems of interpretation and reception, in particular I was interested in phenomena of context change. In this connection I studied the influence of context properties on semantic interpretation. Following common usage among linguists I took sample sentences or sample texts and examined the shift of interpretation due to various context conditions. For example, I made up texts like this:

*Peter schreibt dem Mann im Gefängnis einen Brief.
Er berichtet, daß er von einem der Wärter ständig
schikaniert werde. Seiner Ansicht nach sehe man
daran, daß der Aufenthalt in einer Nervenheilanstalt
unerträglicher sein könne als im Gefängnis.*

The English translation might go as follows:

*Peter is writing a letter to the man in prison.
He reports that he is permanently annoyed by
one of the attendants. In his opinion this shows
that staying in a mental hospital may be more
unbearable than staying in a prison.*

* This paper is a revised version of a manuscript of a talk I gave in Hannover in November 1980. The development of the theses presented here has benefited from discussions with a number of people, for example W. Kallmeyer and the members of the working group "Sprache und Logik". In particular I want to express my thanks to H. Rieser for many discussions and helping with the English.

¹ I don't like the term "hermeneutic", since with this notion I associate all the negative phenomena of the interpretive paradigm.

The following comments refer to the German version.

If you read only the first sentence it is not quite clear whether it is Peter or the man who is in prison. After having read the second sentence you will assume that it is Peter who is staying in prison. However, this assumption turns out to be inadequate after the end of the third sentence is reached.

My original aim was to develop a model for the process of reception. Contrary to usual linguistic models of communication I wanted to have a model with explicit rules determining which of the possible meanings of a word, a sentence or a text are correct in a given context. Furthermore I didn't believe that it would be effective to generate all possible meanings of a verbal expression within a text grammar first and to filter out the correct meanings in a second step. I rather favoured a method integrating the mechanisms of meaning construction and meaning selection.

However I soon realized that one cannot develop such a model of reception in one's armchair relying only on intuitive experience and one's own communicative competence. In other words, I arrived at the conclusion that model building with respect to a theory of reception demands serious empirical investigations. At least one should consider the results of such investigations. They are to be found, above all, in psycholinguistics and in conversational analysis. Therefore I didn't continue my work on logical models and started to study some of the recent literature in psycholinguistics. Although many interesting results can be found there, they are not very relevant for my theoretical purposes. The reason for this is that controlling contextual properties is not the primary aim of psycholinguistic investigations. In my opinion many of these investigations even have an experimental design which is fairly unsophisticated as far as context control is concerned.

Later on I got confronted with conversational analysis. Together with W. Kallmeyer I started a project investigating problems of understanding in communication. We studied how such problems arise, how they become manifest in behaviour and how they finally get solved. Work in this project has given me valuable insights as far as the ways of meaning construction are concerned. However, I know that I am still far away from my original aim: the complexity of these processes is considerably higher than one can imagine at first sight.

1. Taking account of all this we may justly ask whether word semantics should be regarded as a research area in its own right at all. A positive answer to this question seems to pose many problems. Whatever answer we may give to it, it still remains true that word semantics is an essential component of a semantic theory. It also plays an important role for the progress in semantic research in general. Here I mention only four points which hopefully show this. First, there is no serious semantic theory which is not based on the assumption that the meaning of a sentence must be constructed out of the meanings of its parts

in some way or other. Secondly, meaning-composition principles can easily be studied with respect to nominal and other compounds and such investigations may give an indication how these principles work in general. Thirdly, research on ambiguities is still an important test case for studying the influence of context parameters on semantic interpretation. And finally, one of the central semantic problems treated recently, the problem of vagueness, has been mainly discussed on the word level. I think that such a restriction is legitimate in the present stage of theoretical research. These arguments have led to a considerable increase of research on word semantics during the last few years. I assume the present volume will show some of the progress in this area.

I will now turn to the following question: Which consequences might result for semantics from conversational analysis? In my statement I want to illustrate such consequences with reference to word semantics. Before I can answer that question, however, I must point out three problems. First, there does not exist one coherent paradigm of conversational analysis. The approaches existing reflect different aims and interests and not everyone can be used for investigations in word semantics. Roughly speaking, problems of word semantics cannot be treated if research interests are restricted to formal structures of conversation as it is frequently done by American conversational analysts. Secondly, no theoretical framework of conversational analysis has been worked out thus far. Hence, the central theoretical principles proposed are far too general and often lack detailed application conditions. Thirdly, many of the results of conversational analysis should be rephrased and interpreted in the light of linguistic theories old and new if one wants to use them for the construction of explanatory models. These points may indicate that my assumptions concerning conversational analysis and its theoretical implications are not always identical or even compatible with the doctrines of other conversational analysts.

2. I now want to present the conclusions I drew from the findings of conversational analysis. I will do so by proposing and justifying ten theses. Limitations of time prevent me from illustrating them by suitable empirical data. Besides that, I sometimes have to cut short my arguments which therefore might lack some specificity.

(1) For empirical research on word semantics the Saussurean concept of sign is not effective. If one considers a word as a unit consisting of a sequence of phonemes or graphemes and a possible meaning, then only the first component is empirically accessible in a more direct way. The second component must be found out by observing and interpreting the behaviour of communication participants. This is a much more problematic and difficult task than assigning a sequence of phonemes to a verbal utterance. Using a Saussurean notion of sign one would thus frequently arrive at vaguely determined objects. I think such a situation would not be a favourable one. Hence, I prefer a rather

“material” sign conception which regards a sign as a sequence of phonemes or graphemes. By the way, despite of introducing signs in the sense of de Saussure first, many authors later on use such a material notion without even noticing it.

In thesis (7) I will argue that in principle one can assign an unlimited number of meanings to each word. If this thesis is correct, a Saussurean sign conception would result in an unlimited number of signs for each word (in the material sense). This would then lead to an enormously complicated ontology. Even if the above hypothesis is not accepted in its strongest form as far as the unlimited number of meanings is concerned, adhering to the material sign conception still yields some advantage as the following argument demonstrates: if we assume that finitely many meanings (although a considerable number of them) exist, we can model all of them in a fairly rigid way. This is done by designating some as primitive and by deriving the rest via suitable meaning-construction rules.

(2) Under empirical aspects not the usual meanings considered by linguists are the primarily relevant meanings to be treated in a semantic theory. Instead of these more abstract meanings, one gets confronted with the meanings actually constructed or realized by the participants of conversations. The real meaning of a word in conversation very often differs from its standard meanings. In general hence, real meanings should be considered in the word-semantic component of an empirical semantics. More precisely, in my opinion there are three main tasks for this component. First, methods must be developed for determining real meanings in specific situations. Secondly, it must be investigated *empirically* which of the possible meanings of a word can be regarded as standard meanings at all, i. e. social stabilized meanings in specific and likewise socially stabilized contexts. And thirdly, one has to find out procedures by which real meanings are constituted out of standard meanings in the processes of production, reception and interaction.²

I assume that in general both questions, i. e. whether a meaning may be considered a standard one and whether a meaning-constitution procedure is admissible cannot be answered without reference to a special social group.

(3) For analogous reasons as in theses (2) I would say that actually constituted contexts and not the usual dictionary contexts should be regarded as the primarily relevant objects of a semantic theory. Until now no systematic and empirically adequate context theory has been developed. Neither the ontological status of contexts has been clarified nor have methods for the individuation of contexts been proposed. There are only few empirical investigations dealing with the following problems. How can contexts be constituted by participants in communication? Which is the influence of specific context-constitution procedures on semantic interpretation? Since we don't know very much about real context-constitution procedures, it is not yet clear

² It can be shown that there are specific activities in conversations which serve for a cooperative constitution of real meanings.

as well whether one has to distinguish between standard and non-standard cases of context constitution. Finally it is not known at present which contexts should be considered as standard contexts.

(4) In my opinion it would not be adequate to assume that in a given context each word has only one meaning or a limited number of meanings with equal saliency. I think that for each context a preference relation is defined on which meaning selection depends. The stability of this relation, however, is not always very high: frequently minimal changes in context properties may suffice for switching the preference order. The phenomena of context dependent preference and preference switching can be illustrated e.g. by considering the famous test sentence "Every man loves a women". With respect to English and German a preference for a distributive reading of this sentence can be observed. In my opinion, the opposite holds true for sentences such as "Two automobiles are not so expensive as you might think". In this example the collective reading is preferred. But if one adds "the Opel Chevette and the Ford Fiesta" the preference order is changing.

(5) With respect to natural languages the so called Frege principle, which says that the meaning of any complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts (cf. Cresswell 1973, p. 75) is not valid in its strict sense.

This claim can already be substantiated on the word level by showing that nominal compounds have more than one standard meaning. In general I assume that the system of meaning-construction procedures is non-deterministic. The reason is that meaning-construction procedures cannot be chosen in a unique way. Furthermore I suppose that there exist many more procedures than usually considered in linguistics.

(6) The undeterminedness of meanings claimed in thesis (5) is not only due to the non-deterministic system of procedures but also to the existence of non-standard procedures in this system. Participants of conversations may apply meaning-construction procedures created only with respect to a special situation. I assume that both types of procedures, meaning-composition and meaning-modification procedures, may include non-standard steps of meaning construction.

(7) As already mentioned above, I try to defend the perhaps provocative claim that an unlimited number of meanings may be assigned to any word. There are two main reasons for this: First, for each finite set of contexts one can define a new context and generate a suitable new word meaning. This is achieved by applying only standard procedures in a way such that the resulting meaning differs from all the meanings being assigned in standard ways with respect to the original set of contexts. Secondly, by applying non-standard procedures one can construct an unlimited number of meanings for a word in a given context.

(8) The thesis concerning the number of meanings in no way contradicts the fact that participants of conversations usually constitute meanings they share, which finally guarantee understanding.

Not every possible meaning of a word will be accepted by the participants in a situation. However, a meaning which has either not been standardly constructed or not preferred first may be established and sustained at least for some time if participants have agreed on it. In conversational analysis the process of arriving at such an agreement is studied under the label "negotiation".

(9) The process of negotiating is bound to specific rules, but these rules do not determine which meaning of a word is acceptable in a given situation. Despite this, participants have internalized standards fixing the extent to which deviant meanings may be accepted.

Such standards are not absolutely valid but depend on situation parameters. For example, if adults converse with children, they are more easily prepared to accept strongly deviant meanings.

(10) If the tolerance span with respect to deviant meanings is not strictly determined in a given context it may be the object of negotiation.

I think it is a well known fact that participants adopt different degrees of tolerance in different realizations of the "same" context. It depends on the result of a tolerance negotiation whether the action of having assigned a deviant meaning will be estimated as admissible. This in turn also determines whether the selection of such a problematic meaning must be accompanied by an excuse or simply by an explanation.

3. In the final section I will outline some aspects of a semantic theory based on such theses as proposed in section 2.

3.1. One of the difficulties for applying linguistic methods to text interpretation is due to the fact that until now semantic theories don't have conditions stating which context information is required for a correct interpretation. For example, it is not quite clear how much information you need if you want to interpret a historical novel like "The adventurous Simplicissimus" by Grimmelshausen. Is it necessary to know all about the Thirty Years' War and the social and cultural circumstances of those days? If you don't have a criterion for delimiting the set of relevant context information you will never know what an adequate interpretation looks like. According to W. Kallmeyer's and my conception of context this problem is solved in the following way: It is not the interpreter who may autonomously decide on the relevance of a context information. Instead we assume that the participants in communication constitute the context and apply specific procedures for this task. Hence, the interpreter in principle has to analyse occurring context-constitution procedures and their results. In case of text interpretation only the author's constitution procedures can be observed. Therefore we can only gain context information explicitly considered relevant by him. Obviously, the difficult empirical problems of determining context information implicitly presupposed or indirectly given still remain. The indirect constitution of context conditions

only locally valid plays an important role, especially on the word level. Although these problems may be very intricate, there is a comforting assumption of conversational analysis: if a participant believes that presupposing one of the required context informations may block understanding, he will either prefer to give this information explicitly or he will test correct understanding later on. In other words, whether special hints are given or not the interpreter will either draw the relevant conclusions or else use only facts generally known with respect to the underlying situation and the meaning-constitution or the meaning-selection processes.³

All things considered, the proposed context conception shows a way for developing an empirical context theory. Results of this theory will yield preciser information for the problem which contexts or context aspects are to be provided in a lexicon. The main difference between traditional word semantics and the conception presented here consists in the assumption that for semantic interpretation knowledge about standard meanings of words with respect to standard contexts does not suffice. In addition, one needs knowledge concerning the standard procedures of context constitution and meaning construction.

3.2. Granted that thesis (2) and the importance of real meanings for word semantics is accepted, then the traditional separation into semantics and pragmatics becomes pointless. Frequently the influence of parameters usually estimated as pragmatic is due to the construction or selection of a specific word meaning. The separation becomes problematic at least if one considers the meaning of a word in a given sentence or text, since the sentence or text itself may introduce relevant informations with respect to pragmatic parameters. Nevertheless, there is some theoretical motivation for distinguishing different levels of meaning constitution in a semantic theory. The distinction arrived at will turn out to be similar to the well-known semantic vs. pragmatic distinction. This is shown by the fact that it is reasonable to separate the meaning of an utterance from its function. Consider the sample sentence "There is a draught here" which has received considerable attention from German linguists. This sentence may in suitable situations have the function of demanding "Please, shut the window" but it does not necessarily mean this (in some restricted sense of meaning). The separation into meaning and function, however, cannot be established absolutely and for all situations. It is clearly context dependent. If the boss utters this sentence to his secretary, it may already have the meaning "I order you to shut the window". Over and above that, the utterance perhaps may even get the function of expressing e.g. irritation over the fact that the secretary opened the window and fully turned on the radiator.

³ In particular, if there are no specific informations on the underlying situation, one may assume the "empty" context and assign the so called stereotype meanings to words.

3.3. In linguistics, literary theory and philosophy of language the question has often been discussed whether a text interpretation should reconstruct the author's intention or the conventional meaning conveyed. Up to now different answers have been given to this question. Judged in the light of conversationalist views on negotiation neither intentionalists nor conventionalists are right in the end. On the one hand participants in communication may sometimes accept the intended although deviant meaning proposed by the speaker/writer. But they are not obliged to tolerate deviant meanings in all cases and may hence estimate the verbal behaviour of the speaker/writer as incorrect because it violates general meaning conventions. On the other hand participants may always demand that meaning conventions are observed, but if they were never prepared for adopting temporarily intended instead of conventional meanings, they would be judged incooperative.

3.4. Besides the general consequences for an empirical semantic theory the theses presented also lead to new views on special problems of semantics. From these I will discuss here only the problems of ambiguity and vagueness.

How can the notion of ambiguity be defined? To say that a word is ambiguous if and only if it has more than one meaning would not be reasonable, since every word is ambiguous in this sense. That is why one has to introduce a context dependent notion: a word is ambiguous with respect to a given context if and only if it has more than one meaning in this context. This definition, however, does not seem to explicate adequately the original intuition which amounts to saying e. g. that a word like "bank" is ambiguous but "banjo" isn't. I think ambiguity in this sense can be identified with ambiguity with respect to the empty context. If this is accepted, two problems remain, nevertheless. First, according to the argumentation for thesis (7) the meanings of words are not limited in a given context. Hence one has at least to restrict the above definition to the case where there is more than one standard meaning. In my opinion this does still not suffice, in addition, one should refer only to meanings which are dominant with respect to the preference relation tied up with the given context. Secondly, it is not sufficient to demand that there is more than one dominant meaning. Above all, these meanings must strongly differ from each other. This "strong difference" condition cannot be formulated in the usual linguistic frameworks. One needs a topological characterization for it.

3.5. It is very difficult to give an adequate explication of the notion of vagueness within the usual semantic frameworks. In particular the following problems have not or not sufficiently been discussed until now. First, similar to the case of ambiguity one has to provide a vagueness definition for words which takes account of context dependence and refers to dominant meanings: a word is vague with respect to a given context if and only if it has a uniquely determined dominant meaning in this context and satisfies some additional

conditions with respect to the dominant meaning. Secondly, one has to distinguish between vagueness and indefiniteness. For example, the German adjective "geradzahlig" (meaning "is an even number") is applicable to natural numbers but not to men. And it would scarcely be accepted if anybody tried to extend its range of application. On the other hand the adjective "old" may be inapplicable in every context for all men and women aged between 35 and 50 (it neither holds true that such a person is old nor that he/she is not old). However, the participants of a conversation may come to agree on temporarily extending the application range of "old". Perhaps they negotiate to use "old" for persons of 65 or more and "not old" for persons younger than 50.

The discussion of these examples illustrates that it would be reasonable to use negotiation for an explication of vagueness. More precisely, a word may be called vague with respect to a given context if for every two of its dominant admissible interpretations there exists another admissible and dominant interpretation which can be constituted from the original interpretations by negotiation. I assume that the participants of communication are provided with specific standard models of interpretation assimilation with respect to such negotiation processes. In particular, there are the models of minimal and maximal consensus. With respect to our example "old" the minimal consensus model leads to the following interpretation: a person is called old (not old) if and only if he/she is old (not old) according to both the original interpretations; in this model the (positive and negative) application ranges are intersected and therefore the range of inapplicability may increase. In the maximal consensus model only inconsistent results in the application of "old" are resolved and the inapplicability range is made as small as possible (e. g. a person is called old if he/she is old according to one interpretation and if "old" is not applicable to him/her in the other interpretation).

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