Is pragmatics the answer to our quest for meaning?

A review of Mira Ariel’s new book *Defining Pragmatics* *

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In this paper, I aim to explore the contribution (neo-)Gricean pragmatics, as seen by Mira Ariel, can make to the notion of meaning. In her view, the ‘semantic meaning’ of a sentence, seen as the core unit of grammar, can be computed on the basis of the (rule-based) code of a given natural language, revealing the range of meaning(s) this sentence has in isolation. Pragmatic meaning starts with semantic meaning; it is calculated through ‘inferencing’, involving the contextualisation of this sentence and the application of (universal) reasoning. It makes us understand a sentence. This view comes with problems, e.g. the notion of language as ‘code’, the status of rules, the borderline between grammar and pragmatics, the issues of cognition and of the speaker’s intentions (problems of which Ariel is very much aware). As an alternative, I will suggest an approach that bases the interpretation of text segments on discourse evidence shared by the interpretive community, without recourse to people’s minds.

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1. Some introductory remarks

In November 2010 I gave a talk at the Department of Linguistics of Hong Kong University on the dual nature of linguistics, between the ‘hard’ sciences on the one hand, and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities, or the moral sciences, as Hume used to call them, on the other hand. What I was not aware of but should have known is that this department pretty much subscribes to the Chomskyan view that to study language properly means to study universal grammar, grammar
being the imprint of our innate capacity for language and consisting of components such as syntax, the lexicon, and, sometimes seen as more peripheral, semantics. In this language model, words (and the syntactic relations obtaining between them) have a fixed meaning that can be expressed in the form of an abstract calculus, equivalent to the way in which the semantic meaning is represented in the mind. Syntax combines words into sentences by slotting the words into the terminal nodes of trees representing their syntactic structure. Sentences are generated by speakers and subsequently parsed by hearers according to the rules of the language module of the mind, the language faculty or language organ, as Chomsky sometimes calls it. This parse is the mental representation of the sentence, available to linguists through a translation into a more or less abstract formula, as linguistic theories model this innate generative and parsing algorithm in the form of a calculus, thus presenting the language system as a clockwork-like mechanism.

In these theories, what is actually said in the myriad of interactions occurring any moment has no impact on this language system. It does not change or add to the ‘semantic meaning’ of words or sentences. The language system is as solid as a Swiss timepiece. Discourse, on the other hand, is chaotic, random and unpredictable. In what Chomsky calls ‘performance’, we may flout the rules of the language system as much as we like, and yet the language system will not be affected. Linguistics as a ‘hard’ science needs such a system. A parse is a parse is a parse. This is language as defined by universal grammar, language pure, uncontaminated by the corruptions we find on the surface of our natural languages.

In my Hong Kong talk I did not look at sentences but at discourse. When we say something, this utterance has a meaning. It consists of arbitrary signs, signs not representing the material object they are (for instance the acoustic sequence) but standing for something they are not. For something to become a sign, two or more people are needed; a single monadic mind won’t do. Someone may suggest that this thing stands for that, and someone else has to accept. If they do not agree they have to fight it out. Does the sound sequence or the written word abortion mean the murder of an unborn baby, or does it stand for a procedure within the right a woman has over her body? Under which conditions should abortion be treated as a criminal offence? To a large extent, much larger than linguists in the past have been aware of, discourse consists of such negotiations. In their contributions, the members of a discourse community discuss the nature of the objects (for instance ‘abortion’) for which they have constructed signs. Signs are a matter of discourse, not of ‘grammar’ in the Chomskyan sense. A ‘real’ linguist (as much as he or she would deal with semantics at all) would tell us that whatever people say about the discourse object ‘abortion’, however they define the lexical item abortion, does not change the ‘semantic meaning’ of this word. This is where I disagree. This is a serious matter. For the ‘real’ linguists, meaning is an intrinsic part of the
language system. For people analysing discourse, it is whatever a discourse makes of it, including wildly diverging opinions. Only theoretical linguists and lexicographers make us believe that single words in isolation have a fixed meaning.

The language *langue*-linguists deal with, and the language we find in discourse look very much like different things. This is why, for the last forty years or so, there has been another way to look at it. Paul Grice, the founder of pragmatics, and still the key theoretician to whom Mira Ariel defers, has taught us that we can view meaning as a complementation of ‘semantic’ meaning by ‘pragmatic’ meaning. Semantic meaning is part of the language system, of the ‘code’, while pragmatic meaning is what our mental processes (or actions?) will add to the semantic meaning by using reason and drawing inferences, by looking at words in the co-text and the wider context in which they occur, by interpreting them, by making sense of them. The task of pragmatics is to describe and explain the principles determining this interpretation. Pragmatics, though, is far from being a unified theory. As we shall see, Ariel for instance distinguishes between small-tent and big-tent pragmatics.

The idea shared by universal grammar and by pragmatics is that the task of linguists is to show how thoughts are turned into language (sentences), and how language is turned into thoughts. This dates back at least to Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* (Arens 1984), was frequently repeated through the ages, for instance in Occam’s *Summa Logicae* (Loux 1998) and Descartes’ *Discours* (Descartes 1968), and has found its current expression in Jerry Fodor’s *Language of Thought* (Fodor 1975), in which he presents a universal mentalese as the semantic component of universal grammar. Universal grammar, the language system shared by all languages, is a set of rules not only telling us what can be said and what not but also how the ‘linguistic code’ of an utterance can be processed into a mental representation, a kind of algorithmic formula encapsulating the semantic meaning mentioned above. But this formula in itself can never suffice. According to Grice’s view, semantic meaning is underdetermined and often ambiguous and fuzzy. It does not fully reveal what a speaker wants to convey, his or her intentions. Therefore it needs to filled with life by the inferences the hearer makes, by putting the utterance into context, by adding our world knowledge to it. When was the utterance made, by whom, in which situation? What happened before, and how came it about? Our minds are primed for this task. They allow us if not to read the mind of the speaker, on the basis of the ‘semantic meaning’ and our inferences on top of it, at least to infer the speaker’s intentions. This is what pragmatics is about.

My own approach to meaning is different. While many people believe that we know how the mind works, I remain deeply sceptical. Half a century of cognitive sciences has not resulted in a widely accepted grand theory of the mind. We still do not know how mental concepts compare to words, whether in a universal
mentalese or in a natural language. Fodor seems to believe there is a one-to-one correspondence between word meanings and concepts (1998:2), while Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1998:189), building on Grice's edifice, insist that “there are a great many stable and effable mental concepts that do not map onto words”. Ariel, unlike other pragmatists, for instance, Stephen Levinson (e.g., 1997), does not offer a detailed view on the working of minds. But for her, as for all other linguists committed to pragmatics in the Gricean tradition, as indeed for everyone, inferring, as the key phenomenon pragmatics is concerned with, is a mental activity. Do we really know how the mind works?

It is not just the principal impossibility of looking into people’s (or even our own) heads, in spite of all the recent claims of the neurosciences, that has made me choose a different approach (Teubert 2010:33–109). After 20th century mainstream theoretical linguistics with its focus on a language system located in people’s solitary minds did not make much progress in coming up with an uncontestated theoretical basis, it is, I believe, time to move on from the perspective on language as a psychological phenomenon to one on language as a social phenomenon, as something taking place not so much inside as between people. Whereas Fodor (2005:29), for instance, believes that “the primordial function of language is not communication but the externalisation of thought”, we would be equally justified to assume that once people had the necessary genetic equipment and the proper epigenetic conditions, they would use language to tell each other what to do. Language, as I see it, is the core, the beginning, of all symbolic interaction. Language is primarily dialogic, as Edda Weigand (e.g., 2010) keeps reminding us. Language is what people tell each other. In my view, the language that linguists should make their object of research is much more what Saussure called la parole, is discourse at large, everything people have told and are telling each other ever since they first learned to speak. Saussure is not quite the langue-linguist, dealing solely with the synchronic dimension of language the compilers of the Cours want to make us believe. As now becomes apparent from his recently published notes, he assigned a focal role to discourse and the role it plays for the diachronic dimension of language (Jäger 2010:183–190). Admittedly, language as discourse does not make an orderly system. But discourse, unruly, chaotic and unpredictable as it is in the eyes of Chomskyan grammarians (properties it shares with natural selection and quantum mechanics), has the advantage of being available to empirical scrutiny. Discourse can be researched without making assumptions about a ‘semantic meaning’ and about the ways in which people draw inferences.

To review Mira Ariel’s Defining Pragmatics thus gives me the welcome opportunity to voice my discontents with Gricean pragmatics in general, particular since Ariel does not propose to deviate from the basic principles of the received paradigm. She sees her role more as providing a clearer formulation of its tenets,
and of the relationship of pragmatics to grammar, concerns that are also underly-
ing Dan Sperber’s and Deirdre Wilson’s relevance theory, first put forward in 1986.

In this paper, I will first describe Ariel’s book from the outside and then briefly
discuss her definition of pragmatics. I will then reflect on meaning in relationship
to grammar and to pragmatics. Over the years, a number of criteria have been sug-
gested to separate what belongs to grammar from what is the realm of pragmatics,
and Ariel takes them apart, one by one. For Ariel, ‘inference’ alone stands out as
providing a valid, principled criterion on which to draw the borderline, and I will
try to come to an understanding of this concept, and how helpful it might be to
divide meaning up into two separate spheres. There are a number of pairs of op-
opposites supposedly setting them apart, such as competence vs. performance, arbi-
trariness vs. motivation, computation vs. interpretation, and rules/laws vs. choice
that need to be discussed. This will give me a chance to compare the approach of
pragmatics to that of discourse analysis. How does discourse help us to interpret
the meaning of what is said? I will then turn to the role discourse plays in Ariel’s
conceptualisation of pragmatics, and contrast it with my understanding of dis-
course, highlighting the differences by comparing her approach to the analysis
of a discourse segment to mine. In her very insightful final chapter, Ariel gives a
fair picture of the problems she has encountered and looks at a number of “ugly
facts”, reflecting critically on the pros and cons of her approach. This gives me the
opportunity to compare the concept of pragmatics as a necessary complement to
a neo-Chomskyan language system, to a discourse-driven approach that aims to
look at meaning as something exchanged between people, not as something to be
decoded inside people’s heads.

2. Defining Pragmatics: The book

In her preface, Ariel states as the goal of her book “to deconstruct the field of prag-
matics in its rather hollow, big-tent sense, and to demonstrate how it can be re-
constituted on a solid division of labor between grammar and pragmatics” (p. xiv).
According to the publisher’s blurb, she “challenges the prominent definitions of
pragmatics, as well as the widely-held assumption that specific topics — implic-
catures, deixis, speech acts, politeness — naturally and uniformly belong on the
pragmatics turf”. By distinguishing between small-tent and big-tent pragmatics,
the former the playing ground of those (whom) she calls “border-seekers” and the
latter the arena of “problem solvers”, she “reconstitutes the field, defining gram-
mar as a set of conventional codes, and pragmatics as a set of inferences, ration-
ally derived”. Ariel wants first to show that small-tent pragmatics as it is prevalent
in the Anglo-American sphere, concerned with defining grammar in such a way
that there emerges a principled borderline, has largely failed, and secondly to take stock, without necessarily endorsing them, of the cognitive, social and cultural aspects of language explored by big-tent pragmatists, whom she sees more in mainland Europe. Her aim is to present inference as the key concept determining what is pragmatics.

The book is 330 pages long, to which 70 pages of a set of appendices have to be added by downloading them from the CUP website. That is, I believe, a clumsy and not very prudent editorial decision, and, I hope, not one to be repeated by publishers. Unfortunately, the subject index is not very exhaustive. What is absolutely praiseworthy is Ariel’s exclusive use of real language data, taken from a variety of sources and in each case documented. Indeed, the abundant use of examples, namely very brief corpus segments of a few lines, presenting one speaker or an interaction of two or more, together with some contextualisation and a discussion, chosen to throw light on the author’s theoretical stance, is a key characteristic of Ariel’s writing, and certainly of this book. Her examples are drawn from a variety of languages, mostly English and Hebrew, and for all non-English examples, interlinear translations and, wherever necessary, additional contextualisations, are provided.

The book consists of nine chapters in three parts, the first called “Deconstructing pragmatics”. Here she examines the arguments of the border seekers, ultimately rejecting all but one, namely inference. In the second part, “Reconstituting pragmatics”, she draws the borderline between grammar and pragmatics by relying on ‘inference’ as the sole criterion, and embedding it in the tradition of Grice, the Neo-Griceans and, lastly and most importantly, Relevance Theory. Once the new borderline is firmly established, she proceeds to the third and final part, “Mapping the big tent”, in which she explores possible solutions to a wide range of problems inside and also outside of traditional pragmatics, and discussing, in her final chapter “Many questions, some resolutions”.

3. Meaning between grammar and pragmatics

A good starting point for an argument on meaning is to look at Ariel’s notion of grammar, and of ‘semantic meaning’ (as opposed to ‘pragmatic meaning’) as part of it, in particular. While in Defining Pragmatics we have to deduce her notion from frequent interspersed comments, particularly in Part I, she devotes a whole chapter to it in her other recent book, Pragmatics and Grammar (Ariel 2008). Her focus here is on the issue of arbitrariness vs. motivation, and she quickly, if implicitly, distances herself from Noam Chomsky. For her, the object of investigation is not general grammar (properties common to all languages), but the specific
grammars of natural languages. While universal grammar as the (hard-wired) essence of an innate language faculty must be arbitrary, natural languages evolved over time embedded in cultural settings giving rise to changes and motivating the structures we find at any given synchronic slice. In *Defining Pragmatics*, too, grammar is always the grammar of a natural language, while pragmatics is seen as language-independent. This, I feel, introduces a precarious instability into the relationship between the two. Taking the diachronic perspective seriously implies that discourse impacts on the grammar of a natural language. However if grammar (as understood in the comprehensive fashion of Chomsky) is posited as a reflection of discourse, then grammar’s semantic component cannot be independent of it. Yet reading Ariel, I feel that her notion of ‘semantic meaning’ is sometimes still that of universal grammar. Semantic meaning is (p. 24) abstract, pragmatic meaning is contextualised. Semantic meaning is also perfectly compositional, since it is computed by combining the meanings of the parts of linguistic expressions into wholes in a perfectly rule-governed manner. No consistent rules govern the addition of contextual aspects, however, so pragmatic meanings are not compositional.

Are the rules of natural languages motivated or not? It would make sense, I believe, to distinguish between arbitrary rules outside of human reach, for instance the laws of nature as we find them in physics, and rules that are instituted by speakers through prescription or through the unpredictable success of accidental or intended innovations of language use. Not all these rules resulting from human intervention are motivated, but all of them are contingent, while laws are not. A (scientific) law either exists or it does not. It does not depend on its interpretation. The rules of universal grammar (if there were such a thing) are, and indeed must be, laws. For this universal grammar would exist only in the deepest of deep structures, far remote from any ‘performance’, any surface realisation. But this deep structure is not accessible to us, it is not under our control, and we (as speakers, not as linguists) are not even aware of it. We cannot consciously apply its rules, or refuse to apply them. Each deep structure, however, moves up into a natural language surface structure. There we have to deal with contingent rules, as the interdiction of a split infinitive, a rule that can be variously interpreted, that can be violated and that can be changed. Laws, on the other hand, are inviolable. If semantic meaning is something that can be computed, we have to assume that there is no leeway given, no variation possible in the outcome. All computational parsers would come up with the same result, one or in the case of syntactic ambiguity more readings of a given sentence, or, in Ariel’s voice, “[a]t the same time, semantics also requires that we be able to compute the meaning of the whole linguistic unit from the linguistic meanings of its parts in a rule-governed manner” (p. 106).
But as we know, language-specific rules, the grammar rules I am aware of can be violated, and often are. Unless these rules are introduced as innate equipment, they are based on language use, unruly as it normally is from the perspective of a Chomskyan grammarian.

Following Leonard Bloomfield, Ariel states that “[f]ormal grammar is defined as sentence grammar, because the sentence is an independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger linguistic form” (p. 34, Ariel’s emphasis). How ontologically real is the object ‘sentence’? Are they not constructs of (a great many) linguistic theories? Should we really accept that a sentence is the “relevant unit for semantic analysis”, whereas “for pragmatic analysis it is a sentence-context pair” (p. 24)? Sentences have always offered themselves to be the ideal units for syntactic analysis, and they famously play a key role for Chomskyan universal grammar, as the unit within which recursion takes place, recursion now being the last remaining language universal (though now under assault from the Pirahã language). But as the abundance of sentence definitions shows, we should not readily assume that sentences are law-governed, inviolable units of grammar. Linguists of all feathers have constructed their notion of sentence in many ways. Oral societies, though, have no word for this spurious entity, and they would not know whether they ever speak in sentences. To us members of literate societies, sentences make up texts, and texts make up discourse. When it comes to oral communities, though, it is the anthropologists’ linguistic training that tells them to cut up the stream of narration in their transcripts into sentences. People normally tend to speak ohne Punkt und Komma, as Germans are used to say. And if looked at in isolation, a single sentence usually seems to be semantically ‘underdetermined’. Once we include the linguistic context (what Michael Halliday used to call the cotext), the impression of ambiguity and fuzziness tends to disappear, and thus, perhaps, also one of the reasons to separate pragmatics from grammar. While it can make sense to construct the notion of ‘sentence’ for syntactic theories, it is a different matter for meaning. One reason for positing that semantic meaning is to be established on the sentence level is the contention that “the understanding of a sentence is the ability to determine the conditions of reality which would render it true or false”, as Ariel reformulates Donald Davidson’s claim that semantic meaning is truth-conditional (p. 28). Indeed, truth-conditionality has been frequently offered as a criterion separating code meaning (sometimes Ariel also call it “linguistic meaning”) from pragmatic meaning, a criterion, however, which, according to her analysis, does not work (pp. 28–35 and 60–64). She is no doubt aware of ‘grammatical’ issues transcending the sentence boundary and mentions coherence as a phenomenon text grammarians have been concerned with (unfortunately without reference to Michael Halliday), but insists that coherence is a matter of ‘inferencing’, i.e. interpreting the paratactic devices holding a
text together, and thus part of pragmatics (p. 37): “[G]rammatical rules … are restricted to sentence domain, whereas pragmatic generalisations are relevant across sentence boundaries, spanning over discourse segments.”

The rules making up this comprehensive notion of grammar, one that includes semantic meaning, provide, for Ariel and other pragmatists, a ‘code’. What is this object? In their paper on the origin of language, Gloria Orrigi and Dan Sperber (2010) tell us that “human languages are codes which, through a recursive grammar, pair phonetic and semantic structures”. I am sure that Ariel would also agree with the subsequent sentences (Orrigi and Sperber 2010: 97):

According to the code model, sentences of a language are sound-meaning pairs. In order to convey her meaning, all the speaker has to do is encode it into a sound structure that is paired to it in the language, and all the hearer has to do is decode the sound back into the meaning. According to the inferential model … the linguistic decoding of an utterance provides just a semantic structure that falls quite short of determining the meaning intended by the speaker, and that serves rather as a piece of evidence from which this meaning can be inferred.

Ariel comes to the same conclusion (p. 97): “The code versus inference distinction has always been a central basis for a grammar / pragmatics division of labor.”

Could it be that the necessity for a pragmatics results from the unsatisfactory decision to view meaning in terms of semantic meaning vs. pragmatic meaning? Is that the only decision possible? Aren’t there alternatives? Why should the ‘code’ be responsible for the truth-conditionality of sentences in isolation? Why in any case should the conditions under which a sentence taken out of context can be called true be relevant for determining its meaning? This is, I believe, an axiom that a range of Chomsky-inspired linguistic theories have conceived out of their unfortunate wedlock with analytic philosophy. In her last chapter, Ariel seems to question this received wisdom, one that she, too, considers as a serious option in the central argument of her book (p. 242):

Why doesn’t the common-sensical philosophers’ and semanticists’ assumption that grammar (semantics in this case) is devoted to core meanings work? Why can’t it be the case that grammar encodes ‘what is said,’ the truth-conditional aspects of our messages, leaving to pragmatics additional, non-truth-conditional meaning aspects?

How commonsensical is it really, to assume that it is the sentence in isolation, parsed according to the rules of a language system preceding all natural languages, where we should look for meaning in terms of the conditions under which it would be true?

To understand a text segment (consisting of what is traditionally called a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence of a larger piece of text) is to come up with a satisfac-
tory interpretation of its meaning, not to know its truth conditions. Code grammar, with its fixation on the single sentence in isolation, and on words standing for abstract formulae that are best represented in expressions of logico-semantic calculi, will never do. We should not assume that this sort of grammar can deal with meaning. Alan Melby, a pioneer in machine translation, eventually came to recognise the limits of its approach. As Nancy Brigham (2000) sees it, he was part of a [machine translation] team that, beginning in 1970, spent five years reducing language to sememes (language-independent concepts) that could be translated into several target languages. By 1978 he hit a ‘Wall,’ and concluded that ‘the language-independent universal sememes we were looking for do not exist!’ Melby says that the interlingual researchers failed ‘because of a fundamental misunderstanding of … languages.’ ‘I had a degree in mathematics,’ explained Melby. ‘The world was supposed to be a nice, tidy place.’ But that approach ‘leave[s] true creativity behind. All meaning becomes mechanical combinations of atomic word senses.’

Does it help in our quest for meaning to assume such a thing as a fixed code? It is Roy Harris who has consistently argued against the usefulness of such a notion. In “Redefining Linguistics”, he explains why (Harris 1990:29ff.): “By a ‘fixed code’ is meant one which remains invariant from speaker to speaker and from occasion to occasion within the sphere in which it operates…Saussure’s successors also adopted the theory of the fixed code as a basis for linguistics.” He offers five arguments against it. Firstly, it presupposes the same code in speaker’s and hearer’s mind. How realistic is that? Secondly, how should we imagine for such a fixed code to come about? (Remember, for Ariel this code is not universal grammar but a natural language.) A third objection, one that Ariel is very much aware of and one she deals with passim and particularly in her last chapter, is that a fixed code would preclude innovation. But, as Ariel notices (from her pragmatics perspective, p. 243), “it is quite often the case that previously inferred interpretations become grammatically encoded… If today’s grammar is yesterday pragmatics, why isn’t there some organizing principle behind what gets grammaticized and what doesn’t?” In fourth place, speaker and hearer could never be sure that they are using the same code. Finally and most importantly, languages as they are seen here are artificial constructs. There is no ‘English, no ‘Hebrew’, no ‘German’, and even for tiny ‘Rhaeto-Romanic’ there is certainly no code that all its 30000 to 60000 speakers would share. But is it not, at the end of the day, the theory of the fixed code that justifies pragmatics? Consequently a huge effort has been made to define pragmatics against ‘grammar’. This is indeed also Ariel’s main contribution: to make short (or not so short) shrift of the existing borderlines and to redraw them based on a single acid test: inference.
In her second chapter, Ariel surveys, and in the third chapter, she problematises the nine criteria small-tent pragmatists (the "border-seekers") tend to use to distinguish grammatical code from pragmatic meaning. She orders them into three groups of three: (1) meaning criteria: context dependence; nontruth conditionality; implicit and secondary; (2) analytic criteria: discourse unit; extragrammatical accounts; acceptability judgements; (3) cognitive criteria: performance, right-hemisphere specialisation; inference. There is no space, and for my line of argumentation, no need, to go into these aspects in any detail. Coming clearly from the mentalist, Chomskyan tradition, Ariel has little patience with cognitive linguistics other than Relevance Theory itself. Naming Ronald Langacker, in particular, she says that “many linguists genuinely doubt not only the feasibility, but also the desirability of drawing a grammar/pragmatics distinction (cognitive grammarians are a prominent example…)” (p. 104). This could be a reason why she also shows relatively little sympathy for the neo-Gricean Stephen Levinson, who invokes cognition in order to find out what separates the grammar of a natural language from features shared by all languages.

4. Inference and cognition

Inferencing obviously takes place in people’s monadic minds. What we do not get from Ariel is the architecture, or the blueprint, of this elusive object, and the mechanics on which it operates. Therefore I find the distance Ariel (and other pragmatists) keep from to cognitive linguistics a bit strange. After all, inference, in my understanding of this Gricean concept at least, is seen to take place in the (monadic) mind or nowhere. Neither what she says about performance nor about right-hemisphere specialisation provides a model for the way in which semantic meaning is processed into mental representations afforded by pragmatics. I was unable to find a clear answer to questions that have been burning in my mind whenever mentalist or cognitive linguistics is at stake: Does the mind process the sentences it ‘hears,’ i.e. the linguistic input, an input consisting of symbolic material, computationally, or, as others say, syntactically, processed as non-symbolic material? Are we aware of these processes? How exactly do we have to imagine the output, the ‘semantic meaning’? What form does it have? Would lay people who know nothing about linguistics be able to ‘read’ it? Does intentionality play a role, for instance in the sense that the hearer is imagined to be conscious of the output delivered as the parse? Is the semantic meaning identical with its mental representation? Would our mind then draw its inferences, interpreting this semantic meaning / this mental representation? Would we have a word in determining the pragmatic meaning? For instance, what do we have to make of this example?
The Archbishop of Canterbury is to marry Prince William and Kate Middleton at St James’s Palace. (Plymouth Herald, 01. Feb 2011)

The question someone from a different culture could ask themselves is how the inherent ambiguity is to be resolved. Are archbishops allowed to marry, and if yes, are they allowed to marry more than one person, and if yes, can these persons be of the opposite sex? In this case it seems that this sentence is about a hopefully happy menage à trois to begin shortly. Or should we assume a different kind of transitivity, namely a marry in which a subject effects a marriage between two people? Would these be the thoughts, however, the kind of reasoning going on in the mind of someone who habitually reads the Plymouth Herald, has heard a lot about Kate and William and knows about the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury? Would the average citizen of Plymouth really first explore the possible ‘readings’ of this sentence, and then infer from contextual knowledge which meaning is the intended one?

Ariel seems to accept Fodor’s view that the mind is made up of multiple modules around a hub, a central cognitive system. Linguistic input is processed by the language module and then handed over to the hub. For Ariel (p. 49), pragmatic meanings “involve higher cognitive processing.” Does ‘higher’ perhaps mean a processing we are aware of? What seems to loom in the background is the spectre of a ‘homunculus’, in John Searle’s parlance (1992: 84), or ‘central understander’ in that of Daniel Dennett (1998: 287), this intentional entity that makes sense of the outcomes of all those automatic processes going on in our modular mind. For both of them, this notion is a useless fallacy, as the same conundrum would apply also to the mind of this homunculus, and to the homunculus residing in this mind. The absurdity of such a conceptualisation has since been pointed out by Maxwell Bennett and Peter Hacker (2007: 131ff.) as the ‘mereological fallacy’.

Since I have moved to an English working environment, I have come to realise that it is not customary there to distinguish ‘properly’ between processes and acts, actions or activities as I was wont to do in my former German environment, namely as ‘Vorgang’ vs. ‘Handlung’. A process, for me, is something that comes about, either by causation or randomly, but not by someone’s (unpredictable, contingent) agency. While one is right to question whether ‘agency’ ‘really’ exists or is ultimately no more than a discourse construct (a figment of our imagination) to which we have become inexorably attached, interpretation, drawing inferences from evidence, appears to presuppose intentionality, an awareness of what something is about. If we posit mental processes (without agency), we have to provide models of them. If we posit an intentional mind, we need to be given an idea of how the input for its deliberations would look like, and what it is we are doing then. For Ariel, there seems to be this borderline: the mind processing things automatically,
without our intervention, and the mind as a ‘central understander,’ that acts intentionally on the output of those processes. Thus she seems to side with David Swinney, whose experiments demonstrate, for her (p. 48), that in case a linguistic input contains the word *bug*, even in a context pointing clearly to ‘microphone’,

all linguistic [= semantic] meanings (the contextually irrelevant ‘cockroach’ included) are initially accessed by subjects. In this initial stage, then, all and only coded meanings are automatically accessed. A later process (about three hundred milliseconds later) selects the contextually appropriate meaning, and suppresses the irrelevant meaning. The selection process is a pragmatic process, relying on our factoring in plausible speaker intentions.

Who or what is it that accesses those semantic meanings? If this access is automatic, can we influence it? If we single out the pragmatic meaning of what is said, does that mean we have understood the speakers intentions? To me, it does not matter what the *Plymouth Herald* journalist had in mind. Perhaps, when passing on this news agency item he seriously believed that archbishops are bisexualy polygamous. I, the reader, know better. This is, after all, what hermeneutics is about: understanding a text “better than its author,” in Schleiermacher’s formulation (1986: 83). And how reliable are these psycholinguistic or neurolinguistic experiments measuring the time span? I am old enough to remember the many psycholinguistic studies carried out in the heyday of generative transformational grammar that delivered exactly what was predicted: a surface sentence 17 transformations away from its base structure would of course be processed just a tiny bit longer than one undergoing 16 transformations. But what interests me is whether the subsequent inferencing is a process or an act. Are we in charge of it, or does it take hold of us?

It is obvious that Ariel is not only aware of this question but also deeply troubled by it. This is why there is no clear answer. If inferencing is rule-based, then are these rules of the kind that cannot be violated, rules we are not even aware of, or can we be creative and free in interpreting the semantic meaning? She calls to our attention (p. 51) Sperber’s and Wilson’s suggestion that

the inferential processes involved in utterance interpretation are performed by specialized modules with dedicated mechanisms, too, which ensure that the inferencing involved is quite fast. Specifically, Wilson proposes that pragmatics constitutes a sub-module of the mind-reading module, itself distinct from mechanisms responsible for general inferencing.

Indeed, it would seem that for Sperber and Wilson (2002: 21) comprehension is automatic and not available for artful tampering; it “might involve a sub-module of the mind-reading module, an automatic application of a relevance based procedure to ostensive stimuli, and in particular to linguistic utterances”. That sounds
very much like a reference to Fodor's 1983 essay *The Modularity of the Mind*. It is of great comfort that the two authors provide an example (a brief exchange of utterances between Peter and Mary) for the working of this sub-module. Does the procedure they present vindicate the adjective *automatic*? We hear, for instance, that the “hearer is justified in following a path of least effort”. He (Peter confronted with an utterance by his partner Mary) “considers [the listed] implications in order of accessibility, arrives at an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance …, and stops there”. He may eventually arrive “at an interpretation which satisfies his expectations … He does not even consider further possible implications …, let alone evaluate and reject them.” (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 18ff.)

The verb *consider* belongs in Michael Halliday’s world to the ideational, not the material sphere. I don’t expect my laptop to consider anything. When I consider, I don’t know yet what the outcome of my considerations will be. I am not carrying out the commands of a computer program. I take decisions, and they would not be decisions if they were not decisions between similarly viable alternatives, and are therefore contingent and unpredictable.

An apposite question, for which I unfortunately lack the space to delve into here, is the usefulness of the concept of ‘mind-reading’. Is it to be interpreted literally or metaphorically? When I try to figure out what the requests, commands and threats mean that my laptop throws at me all the time, I certainly do not want to read its mind. When someone wants to sell me something over the phone, I have no wish to infer what is going on in their minds from what they say. Of course I would like to know my Vice Chancellor’s intentions for denying me my pay rise, but experience tells me that his letter is carefully constructed not to reveal them. Taking once again the marrying archbishop as an example, it is not the journalist’s mind I am trying to read but what I remember to have heard about things archbishops do and don’t do, that lets me make an informed choice between the options. The hermeneutic approach would not end by reading an author’s mind, even if it begins there.

If Sperber and Wilson leave their readers in a quandary, Ariel does not provide us with a clearer picture of how inference works. According to her, we owe our ability of inferencing to universal reason. This is, I take it, why inferencing cannot take place in the same module as the grammatical decoding of a natural language sentence. Grammar, for Ariel, is language-specific, pragmatics is not (p. 102): “Pragmatic inferences are thus not language-specific. In two senses. They are not specific to language as opposed to nonlinguistic intentional acts, and they are not specific to any language in particular. The correlation between the interpretation/use and linguistic outputs is also not rule-governed.” I am not sure I understand the last sentence. But the rest is clear. The same kind of inferencing we apply to semantic meaning we also apply to making sense of other things we encounter. Here
Is pragmatics the answer to our quest for meaning?

she seems to disagree with Sperber’s and Wilson’s idea of a specific sub-module for dealing with language.

The citation given above continues with this sentence (p. 102): “It [the correlation?] is calculated by invoking our reasoning capabilities.” But we are misled if we take ‘calculating’ as a rule-based activity. Not for Ariel (p. 103): “[C]odes aren’t rationally calculated…, but inferences are calculated, or at least calculable.” For Ariel, codes are ‘computed’, while calculating, inferencing, is not something mechanical but something we carry out intentionally on the basis of the ‘semantic meaning’ (p. 141): “Relevance theoreticians … have … emphasized that these grammatically induced contextual completions [regarding gaps, pronouns and deictics] are fully inferential, in that they are not mechanical.” It is not clear to me, though, to which extent Ariel thinks we, the hearers, are free in our interpretation of the ‘semantic meaning’. In the end, it seems as though inferencing is left to a ‘central understander’, who (or which) is bound by the laws of reason.

5. Ariel on discourse

The notion of discourse is largely if not altogether absent from Defining Pragmatics. Now and then “discourse patterns” are invoked, frequently with the epitheton “extragrammatical”. What are these ominous discourse patterns? There is little contextual content that could provide us with the pragmatic meaning of this lexical item. To find out more about them, we should better turn to Ariel’s Pragmatics and Grammar, a (quite discursive) textbook published in 2008. There we find a short subchapter “Grammatical or extragrammatical? Discourse function and discourse profile” (Ariel 2008: 53–60) and a much longer chapter with the title “All paths lead to the salient discourse pattern” (pp. 149–211). The thrust is obvious: discourse has primarily to do with grammar. We are not told whether there is also a relevant connection between discourse and pragmatics. Thus we learn that “[d]iscourse grammarians insist that discourse is the most important force shaping grammar” (p. 168). What Ariel is critically interested in is not the role of discourse for pragmatics, it is the relationship between discourse and grammar. It is “discourse use, rather than various kinds of raw external forces, that must be taken into account when we consider impact on grammar” (p. 179). Discourse, for her is “the source for differences among languages” (p. 180). What impacts on grammar are “salient discourse patterns”, namely those which become in due course “grammaticalized”, phrases that for unclear reasons get to be repeated so often that they can be seen as part of the lexicon (which is, we remember, a component of grammar), perhaps equipped, I imagine, with their own internal and external local grammars. These “innovative components must first form a recurrent discourse pattern to
qualify for a potential change” (p. 185). What becomes a salient discourse pattern is in the end unpredictable (though Ariel discusses many possible causes). What is important is that these patterns start their life cycle outside of the code (p. 211): “Although salient discourse patterns are a product of very many extralinguistic factors, there is no direct link between any of the extralinguistic forces and grammar. Salient discourse patterns must always mediate.” She concludes: “The point is that linguistic change is mediated by discourse pattern, specifically, by the salient discourse pattern. Salient discourse patterns, no matter what their source is, are a prerequisite for grammaticization.” (p. 189, Ariel’s emphasis)

Is grammar still the main thrust of Ariel’s sparse discussion of discourse also in Defining Pragmatics? She repeats that “salient discourse patterns associating forms with functions” are “the source of codes” (p. 247). But she asks a question that seems to go beyond this bond (p. 230): “[A]re all extragrammatical discourse patterns pragmatic, or are some of them neither grammatical nor pragmatic (9.5)?”

However, it is almost impossible to find in her book a clear answer to this key question. For the remaining pages, discourse patterns seem to be stuff that is gradually turned into grammatical code. She says that an interpretation of them “does not proceed from the compositional meaning to some inference” (p. 250). Discourse patterns, as “interactional patterns,” “are conventional to a specific society, and cannot simply be pragmatically inferred” (p. 251). For, as we have learnt above, inferencing is universal and not dependent on a specific natural language. But is it really a wise decision to relegate the notion of discourse only to grammar, to the ‘code’, and not also interpretation, to the ways in which we make sense of what has been said? Is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is language as ‘energeia’ in Humboldt’s sense, really irrelevant when it comes to making sense of what is said?

6. An alternative model of interpreting

At the beginning of this paper, I have outed myself as a discourse analyst. Perhaps the best way to introduce what I see as an alternative to Ariel’s approach is to interpret one randomly selected example, out of the myriad offered by Ariel, from my perspective.

Here is the discourse segment I have chosen, with her comments (p. 62): “The following Los Angeles Times cartoon demonstrates the same point.” (This point is, as I understand it, that one of the interlocutors, in this case Francis, does not say what he is expected to, by apparently choosing the wrong ‘reading’ of the semantic meaning of the phrase in question, here of looking nice.) “Francis here says he cannot ascertain whether the woman addressing him looks nice, because he does not know what degree of niceness is relevant in this case:
WOMAN: I’ve got a big date, Francis ... Do I look nice??
FRANCIS: Depends. How nice are you supposed to look?
(Los Angeles Times, June 3, 2000)

In other words, Francis cannot determine the truth conditions of ‘I look nice’ without pragmatically narrowing down nice to the contextually appropriate degree of niceness.”

For Ariel, Francis’ task, in making sense of the woman’s question, is to establish the correct truth conditions of this utterance. He cannot do it because he claims to be ignorant of the required degree of niceness. Is he really? After all, this is the caption of a cartoon, and therefore we rather expect to find a counterintuitive punch line. For me it is a wilful misunderstanding of the woman’s question. I do not doubt for a second that Francis understood perfectly well what she wanted to hear. I have no problem in ‘reading’ Francis’ question. But how do I know which reading is expected? How can I convince the peer community that my interpretation is sustainable? For me, the case is simple. Checking my memory, I find analogue cases I have come across. My memory, however, is inaccessible to an interpretive community, and even if I give testimony of it, such testimony is not necessarily admissible to my peers, being for them nothing but hearsay. Objective evidence must be adduced. Where could it be found? All comparable cases have occurred in discourse and thus have become part of it, discourse being the repository of everything that has ever been said. Only a tiny fraction of it is accessible to us. In the early days of corpus linguistics, discourse used to be sampled in corpora. These days, we can access it more directly, via Google or a similar browser. If I want to offer an interpretation of this segment that my peers would find acceptable, I have to provide evidence. Here are five hits (among the first forty, using Google) where there are no three dots in between big date and look nice:

Catsblog II: The Continuation: My Big Date
5 Oct 2007 … Of course with any big date, I got up this morning and made sure I washed my hair and tried to make it all look nice. …
blondes-squared.blogspot.com/2007/10/my-big-date.html

to date Quotes
00:13:44 You want to look nice for your big date, don’t you? quote context …
00:13:44 You want to look nice for your big date, don’t you? …
www.subzin.com/s/to+date/11 -

My New Year’s Resolution: No More Makeup | lovelyish
31 Dec 2010 … So for Sundays or a big date he likes it that I try a little harder. And he tells me I look nice. For that I would spend a long time in …
www.lovelyish.com/.../my-new-years-resolution-no-more-makeup/ -
LS Forums | Oritsé Stories & Dreams Thread

But I still wanna look nice.” “Ooooooh I forgot about your big date with Reeshy!” she says nudging me. “Yes it is. So what am I meant to wear? …

www.jlsofficial.com/gb/forums/viewthread/24330/P1965/ -

Learning to love (A Gaara love story) Lesson 12: Jealously — Story …

8 Jan 2009 … Hitomi smirked: “Well, well, well, look who’s trying to look nice for her big date”. You blushed slightly: “Is it really a date if you’re …

quizilla.teennick.com/…/learning-to-love-a-gaara-love-storylesson-12jealously--

That you want to look nice for your big date is nothing new. Google offers (clones discounted) ca. 500 hits. It is in these texts that we are told, more or less explicitly, what it takes to look nice. Here is, for example, an extract from the webpage “Learning to love”:

Should you really actually try to look nice? How would you even look nice?
You sighed: “What does looking nice even mean?” How were you supposed to style your hair? Like you normally wear it? All down? Or should you mix it up and wear it up sorta?
Hitomi smirked: “Well, well, well, look who’s trying to look nice for her big date” You felt your jaw sink a little downward as Ume walked out and she was certainly a vision in her kimono.
Her hair was tied up with a brown bow so most of it was behind her head yet some was left loose. Her cheeks were pinker then usual but you couldn’t tell if she was blushing or if that was make up it looked so natural. The areas behind her eyes were slightly powdered a brownish red so that her eyes popped more. You couldn’t tear your eyes away from her.
You cleared your throat: “You look nice”
Kankuro seemed to like her short and low cut kimono a lot seeing as though he couldn’t pry his eyes off her. Her hair was all down with a black bow at the side.
Hitomi spun around: “So how do I look?”
Kankuro wiped the drool off his mouth: “Perfect”

There are plenty of similar stories on the web. Hair, makeup and dress seem to be frequently discussed. We are told time and again what to look nice in connection with a big date means. There is no necessity to process the code and extract its semantic meaning, which would then be input for making pragmatic inferences based on universal reason. We do not have to wreck our brain with calculations. It is all there in our memory, or, for us linguistics relying on shared evidence, in the discourse delivered to us by Google.

Would Francis not have known which answer was required? That is not probable. After all, it seems to be one of the mostly frequently asked questions among young people. Discourse, as sampled by Google, does not offer a single case where
the respondent said no or I don’t know or something to that extent. These are the kind of discourse segments we come across (url’s omitted):

26K: girl date “do I look nice” yes
Do I look nice in this shirt?… yes I think it will work
do I look nice in this …yes you look “weff”
Do I look nice?’ She nodded enthusiastically
‘Honey, do I look nice in this dress?’ … Oh yes
When you say, “Do I look nice in this?” he’s thinking, “Not as nice as you’d look out of it.”
“Do I look nice, Ronnie?” She asked in a sultry tone. “Yes,” he said gloomily.
Do I look nice, Mister Somerset? Bond. Yes.
Do I look nice today? Ss: Yes.
Do I look nice?” “You sure do, princess,” he complimented her. …

The respondent has little choice. Whatever he or she might be thinking, the proper answer seems to be an enthusiastic assertion. Not all are happy to comply. I also found, at www.thestudentroom.co.uk, this statement: “It really annoys me when girls ask ‘Do I look nice?” It is easier, though, to give a frank (or funny) answer if you don’t know the questioner. When a young boy asked Yahoo! Answers United States “Do I look nice in this shirt? How old do I look?”, there were these five replies:

You look like a justin bieber, therefore, no.
we’re the same age and yea, you look young like..12 years old.
where a hat… trust me.. u will look cool if u have a hat.. and u look 10.. no joke..
just wear a hat ull look a couple years older
yeah, you look cool.. you look about 13–14.. and dont worry if people tell you look young, thats a good thing…
The shirt looks good. You look about 13–14, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Think about 50 years from now when you’re old and you look younger than your age

Discourse evidence gives us a clear indication that Francis did not slot in the proper answer, thus flouting the woman’s expectation. He also did not say no. He answered her question with another question, a not uncommon device if one wants
to avoid answering and still look co-operative. It is perhaps also meant as a jocular answer, for it is not so easy to measure niceness.

Most of us will have stored similar discourse segments in their memories. But people’s minds are inaccessible to us. When we are asked to interpret the ‘looking nice’-text segment, we have to forward our argument on the basis of evidence available to the ‘interpretive community’, a concept I owe to Stanley Fish (1980). An interpretation to be submitted to this community is not a solitary act of understanding. We do not interpret discourse segments for ourselves; we want to discuss our ‘reading’ with others. If our steps of reasoning should be acceptable to them we should make sure that they are based on solid discourse evidence and not on vague assumptions of the speakers’ intentions.

6. Discourse linguistics and other alternatives

Mira Ariel does not close her eyes to the fact that her new, inference-based take on pragmatics and its border to grammar does not deliver an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem of meaning. There is, she concludes, no “grand design”. There is no clear-cut border. This may be due to the fact that natural languages undergo change. They turn out to be an altogether different kettle of fish from the universal language of thought, hard-wired in our language organ. Natural languages undergo constant change, through the mediation of “discourse patterns.” Grammaticalisation of formerly extralinguistic features is something that must be dealt with. But “extralinguistic” covers also pragmatic features. There still remains a grey area between Gricean maxims and grammar (p. 167): “Particularized and generalized conversational implicatures are inferred, and hence pragmatic, and conventional implicatures are encoded, and hence grammatical.” In more general terms, this means that

discourse functions, and specifically information statuses are sometimes encoded by discourse markers or syntactic constructions, in which case they constitute grammatical phenomena, but they are sometimes derived as inferred interpretations, in which case they constitute extragrammatical interpretations, and should be generated based on the semantic meaning, enriched by contextual assumptions. (p. 210, Ariel’s emphasis)

Thus even though much of “what falls outside of grammar is not invariably pragmatic”, for Ariel much seems to be. But does the lexicon remain inside grammar? “It may well be that what we have ascribed to pragmatic inferencing is often actually lexically accessed rather than inferred.” Thus Ariel accepts the “ugly fact” that “what’s inferable in theory may not in fact be inferred, because the relevant
interpretation is automatically accessed and/or because it’s been conventionalized (to some extent)”. (All quotes p. 248f.) As the grammar of natural languages keeps changing, due to the conventionalisation of pragmatic and other extralinguistic features, and as pragmatics, based on universal reason and perhaps conceptualised as a sub-module of the mind, is not affected by change, it just might not be conceivable to find a working interface between the two.

Where is meaning, then? Does it make sense to distinguish between computable semantic meaning and calculable pragmatic meaning? Chomsky would perhaps not have endorsed his concept of grammar to be applicable to the grammar of natural languages, and certainly would have rejected any contamination of semantic meaning with pragmatic meaning. It would ruin his idea of a language system whose mechanism conforms to permanent unalterable inviolate laws. Ariel is aware of this; she quotes him as saying that incorporating nonlinguistic factors “amounts to a rejection of the initial idealization of language as an object of study. A priori, such a move cannot be ruled out, but it must be empirically motivated. If it proves to be correct, I would conclude that language is a chaos that is not worth studying.” (p. 234)

Meaning, it seems to me, should not be viewed as part of a (or the) language system. Language is, after all, symbolic, and the meaning of a sign is always the result of (ongoing) negotiations between at least two people, negotiations that are part of discourse. Discourse cannot be but self-referential. All meaning is constructed in discourse. There is no need to distinguish between (underdetermined) law-based meaning and the saturation of this meaning through pragmatic inferences. If we, the interpretive community relying on shared evidence, want to find out what a lexical item or a discourse segment (e.g. 'look nice') means, we have to look at discourse, we have to recall and consult those previous discourse segments telling us something of what it means to 'look nice'. Taken together, they detail the negotiations relevant to the current case. If a speaker wants to change the agreement reached, they have to re-open negotiations. Discourse, while not entirely chaotic, is contingent and unpredictable, it makes its own rules and discards them, and it undergoes constant change. But it never stops discussing itself, interpreting what has been said. Discourse is not a mechanical clockwork. Discourse is an organic evolutionary adaptive system. Outside of discourse, there is no meaning.

What pragmatics has in common with the mainstream linguistic theories of the 20th century, theories intent on modelling the language system, is that both approaches view language from the perspective of the monadic mind. But language is dialogic, it is what takes place between people, not inside their heads. Edda Weigand explores discourse as dialogue, and she takes into account the legacy of Mihail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Alfred Schütz and Hans van Eemeren, to name but a few. There is no language without society. The monadic
mind stands still, unless it is engaged in dialogue. Whenever we talk, it is to an imagined or real other. Whenever we say something, we say it in reaction to something said before. By endorsing it, by modifying or rejecting it, by recombining elements that have not been combined before, through permutation and variation, we create continually new content. Mira Ariel has shown in *Defining Pragmatics* how helpful pragmatics can be when we want to make sense of a sentence. Even though I cannot agree with many of her presuppositions, she has demonstrated in her approach an enviable integration of theoretical and methodical exactness and creative ingenuity. What I believe to be her greatest achievement is that she also has pointed her finger time and again to problems still remaining unsolved.

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**References**


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