Pragmatic Strategies

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Introduction

In the seventies Gerald Gazdar developed a theory of formal pragmatics the core of which was his theory of presupposition projection.1 Though Gazdar’s theory covered a wide range of data and though, at its time, it was vastly superior over competing theories, its further development was hampered by some serious problems. One problem was the counterintuitive notion of presupposition which did not capture the intuitive view of presupposition as being information which is in some sense given or taken for granted in a discourse. A concomitant problem was his account of cancellation which was widely felt to be conceptually incoherent. In Gazdar’s view conversational implicatures constitute a stronger kind of information than presupposition: presuppositional information may be defeated by implicatures. This is at odds with our pretheoretical notion of presupposition and conflicts with the standard way this notion is characterized. Intuitively, if a sentence is felt to be presupposing, the presuppositional information is (in some sense to be made explicit) required for its utterance to be interpretable. The standard characterization of conversational implicatures is a very different one. On the

1Gazdar (1979), the published version, is a revision of his 1976 thesis which was completed under the supervision of Hans Kamp.

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Gricean view a conversational implicature is not a semantic requirement for interpretation, but instead an inference that is computed on the basis of the interpretation of a sentence, contextual information and conversational principles. The question then immediately arises how such inferences, which are for their existence dependent on a previous interpretation of the utterance that invokes them, can possibly defeat information which should already be part of the linguistic or non-linguistic context for the inducing sentence to have an interpretation. This problem is the more pressing since the received view tells us that conversational implicatures are the paradigm cases of defeasible inferences. Thus, if there is any direct interaction between presupposition and conversational implicature, one would expect the former to override the latter and not the other way around.

Gazdar’s theory has a dynamic flavour. However, his dynamics is found only at the level of sentential discourse processing and does not extend to the interpretation of subsentential constituents. Moreover, presuppositional information is only computed and incremented in the subsequent context after the propositional content has been computed and incremented. Current theories that are based on dynamic frameworks deviate in exactly this respect and give a very different picture of how presuppositions are evoked and resolved in a context. In contrast to the Gazdarian picture they agree with Frege (1892) and Strawson (1950) that presuppositions are requirements for the interpretation of an utterance, they agree with Stalnaker (1974) and Karttunen (1974) that presuppositional information is information that is in some sense contextually given or taken for granted in a conversation. They agree with Lewis (1979) that this information may not always be explicitly given in the context of utterance, but may be reconstructed, and they thus hold that the felicity of a presupposing sentence may be established by a process of accommodation. On current dynamic assumptions this means that accommodation is not simply a side product of contextual update, which only affects the output context, but should instead be reconstructed as an operation on input contexts so as to enable an utterance to be processed even if the original context didn’t admit it. And, finally, there is by now a consensus that an adequate account of presupposition and presupposition projection is to be construed as a hybrid theory in which semantic and pragmatic principles interact. Existing views mainly differ with respect to the question what exactly counts as contextual requirements for the interpretation of presupposing sentences. They differ moreover in their views on the type of mechanism and the status of the principles that govern accommodation. Heim (1983), Beaver (1995) and other satisfaction theorists basically require that the context