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# ON THE TENSION BETWEEN SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I offer my reflections on the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. I argue that semantics – the relatively stable and context-invariant meanings of the language – is necessarily amplified by pragmatics, which is a way of transcending the possibilities of semantics. Pragmatic layers, especially if they meet the cognitive needs of language users and represent culturally salient concepts, tend to become semanticised. The situation is complicated by the postulation of explicatures, which I argue are not cancellable and mimic the semantic resources of the language. Like entailments they are not cancellable, but they share the features of all pragmatic inferences in that they are calculable. I propose that explicatures are loci of the tension between semantics and pragmatics, and given their lack of cancellability they are strong candidates for inferences that become semanticised. In this paper, I see the tension between pragmatics and semantics exemplified by situations where an excessive weight is placed on the semantics (legal documents, such as laws) and situations where an excessive burden is placed on the pragmatics (pidgins like Tok Pisin). In this paper, I also argue that principles of language use tend to become semanticised in the form of discourse rules. I consider the praxis of language games and argue that discourse rules, unlike principles, have the advantage of being teachable and also of favoring the involvement of speakers in the communicative praxis (Lo Piparo 2010).

Una tradizione plurisecolare ha quasi sempre perduto di vista che, in realtà, le forme linguistiche non hanno alcuna intrinseca capacità semantica: esse sono strumenti, espedienti, più o meno ingegnosi, senza vita e valore fuori delle mani dell'uomo, delle comunit<sup>^</sup> storiche che ne facciano uso (De Mauro 1965).

("A tradition going back several centuries has almost always lost sight of the fact that in reality, linguistic forms do not have any intrinsic semantic potential: they are just instruments, expedients, more or less ingenious, but without life

and value, unless they are connected to the human agent and to the historical community which uses them.")

### *Introduction*

Why is it that there is a (human) language? The answer (one among many) might be that a language enables human beings to talk (talk about states of affairs, talk about their thoughts, express feelings, get other people to do something for them (see Jakobson 1960 on the functions of language), transmit information from one generation to the next (propagation of culture<sup>2</sup>), talk with other human beings (and sometimes with animals, who may be receptive to certain commands and thoughts). It would be impossible to understand the workings of a language without reference to its users (Mey 2001; Jucker 2012) and we take pragmatics to be broadly related to how language users use semantic resources to produce speakers' meanings. Human beings use language to coordinate their actions<sup>3</sup> – and the presupposition, in such uses, is that fellow human beings understand their words and their utterances. And the crucial question is: on the basis of what? Presumably, there are conventions pairing utterances and thoughts (or utterances and commands, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. If you know the words of a language and you also know the syntactic configurations in which those words can appear, and the meanings expressed by those configurations, you are also in a position to understand what the meaning of an utterance (or any utterance) is. Of course, it is now universally accepted that you do not directly pair utterances and meanings, as such pairings are mediated by knowledge of words and knowledge of syntax. You can surely say (and this is presumably a shortcut). 'This utterance means X' and this makes it appear that you associate the utterance with a certain meaning. But this is a simplification. While for words, presumably, you learn meanings item by item (but there are exceptions, since there are composite

words where it is possible to predict the overall result without having to learn the complex item by itself; furthermore, consider that the meanings of words can be extended through pragmatics (Recanati 2004; Leonardi Forthcoming)), for utterances (unless we consider some exceptions like idiomatic sentences) the meaning of the unit is mediated by lexical semantics and by the grammar of the language. In other words, if you consider 'John cut the fish' and 'John cut the fish with a knife', not only is it the case that you do not learn the meanings of these two utterances one by one, but there is a systematic relationship between the two utterances. It is clear that they must share some meaning and that one differs from the other because there is a constituent which adds further meaning (making explicit some semantic relations which were implicit in the utterance, such as the instrumental function). If words and grammar are conducive to meanings, and thus allow speakers to express and understand the thoughts that are expressed through them, this must be due to a convention. Presumably we identify a language with a convention, which was developed by the linguistic community as a whole and not by individuals, even if we grant that certain public figures associated with immense prestige were of help in consolidating or spreading certain words (amazing though it may be people like Alessandro Manzoni had an enormous influence on the Italian language)<sup>5</sup>. It is in vain, as Saussure struggled to bring home to us, to try to identify part of the language with individuals, although it is possible that linguistic changes generated by particularly powerful individuals were accepted by the majority of language users because such changes met the cognitive needs of the users and fulfilled functions for which there was an acute need in the society in question. So, we grant that there is a certain fluidity in a language, but we also accept that conventions play a major role.

In another paper (Capone forthcoming a), I argue that semantics is necessarily truth-conditional, as it is devised to express thoughts. If something is a thought, we can say of it:

It is true;  
It is false.<sup>6</sup>

Why should a semantics have been devised, if not for the purpose of expressing thoughts? And is there a thought if only certain of its skeletal elements can be recognised and we cannot say of it either that it is true or that it is false?

It is true that certain thoughts can be skeletal and that pragmatics can provide further flesh to them. But I am persuaded that of the minimal thought expressible by a sentence, we should be able to say: It is true; or It is false.

Nevertheless, there are cases of what is often called 'pragmatic intrusion'. We want to rescue thoughts from contradiction or absurdity, and when it happens that semantics by itself leads to possible contradictions or absurdities, pragmatics intervenes to get rid of them. So, while in a majority of cases, basic truth-conditions can be established on the basis of what is said (or written), in some problematic cases, the literal sentence exhibits a problematic property: it is possibly contradictory or absurd. Pragmatics, in such cases, has a reparative function. Furthermore, in many cases, the literal truth-conditions do not suffice for ordinary communication to take place, as they say too little about our thoughts. So pragmatics intervenes to provide further material "for the semantics to flesh out the semantics", as Carston 2002 has it.

Could we then say that semantics and pragmatics are in competition? Intuitively, if there is a competition or a tension, this must be an infinite tension, one that can never be resolved. Semantics tends to be complemented and enriched by pragmatic layers. Once these pragmatic layers become sedimented in the language (and sedimentation occurs if a pragmatic innovation fills a slot which has become indispensable because of its cultural salience, the pragmatics is replaced (again) by semantics.<sup>7</sup> Then semantic meanings are augmented through pragmatics. And so on *ad libitum*. So there is a

circle, one that is productive and which is fed by cultural innovations and new cognitive needs, one that goes from semantics to pragmatics and then from pragmatics back to semantics. But if there is such a circle, this means that semantics plays some central (in a special sense of 'central') role, there cannot be a pragmatics without a semantics but also, there cannot be a semantics without a pragmatics. In the initial phase of languages, human beings must have had pragmatic means of getting their messages across and express communicative intentions (gestures, gaze, tone of voice, shouting, etc., an arsenal which though primitive is still retained by modern language users. Volterra et al. 2004). But then, such pragmatic means must have allowed these users to settle on conventions about at least some basic words.

It is difficult to get out of the circle. Semantics and pragmatics seem entangled to an extraordinary degree. Yet, in the actual workings of the language, they seem to have established autonomous roles. In most cases it is possible to distinguish semantics from pragmatics, but there are points – which I call *loci of tension between semantics and pragmatics* – where pragmatics becomes semanticised. In other words, while it is a rule that pragmatic inferences (at least the potential ones) are cancellable, in such loci of tension between semantics and pragmatics, pragmatics mimics semantics and, thus, the inferences, though pragmatic, are not cancellable. Burton-Roberts (2005 and forthcoming) imputes the lack of cancellability to the expression of strong intentions – when an intention is expressed (implicated or not), it cannot be cancelled (it cannot be un-implicated). While I certainly agree that intentions play a role in the cancellability (or rather, the lack of it) of explicatures (and implicatures), I link this phenomenon to the structural characteristics of a discourse where the inferences are judged not to be cancellable.

Is it possible that explicatures at the loci of tension between semantics and pragmatics are stronger candidates for grammaticalisation? If at such points pragmatics mimics semantics, it is not impossible



that these are precisely the points where a grammaticalisation process starts. Since explicatures are not cancellable at these points, language users may start to think that the inferences involved are on their way to acquiring a grammatical status.

*1. On intentions, semantics and pragmatics*

*Prima facie*, it might appear that semantics is what allows speakers to convey their (linguistic) intentions. And surely, one needs semantics to articulate thoughts, commands, expressives and so on. However, semantics is not enough. It appears to me (and to people like Kent Bach, 2001) that for semantics to work, it needs a pragmatic path. Only against a background of clues and cues (Dascal 2003), do linguistic intentions emerge. Semantics would not be enough to fix intentions. To convince you that this is (must be) the case, consider a sentence written on a blackboard:

(1) Caesar was a dictator.

Now, depending on the context, the example could be taken in many ways. It could be part of a history lesson and, thus, it could be uttered (or written) assertively, the teacher being responsible for the utterance and thus bound to provide further evidence, should that be required (in case someone refuted the assertion). Or it could be (merely) a linguistic example, one provided in the course of a linguistics lecture at the University in order to exemplify some syntactic or semantic structure (see also Kecskes 2012: 191). And in this case it would not be uttered assertively. As nobody had the intention to utter this sentence as part of an assertion, nobody is bound to provide further evidence should someone refute it. (As a linguistic example it can stand on the blackboard alone, without anyone giving voice to it; by contrast if uttered assertively, it must

necessarily be linked to a voice that is responsible for the assertion).

A this example shows, the intentions are never *in* the sentence, but rather *outside* of it, thus, the issue of intentionality is partly semantic and partly pragmatic. Once pragmatics (via contextual clues) fixes a serious intention the words matter and it is the semantics that tells you what specific intention the speaker has (or had) in uttering a particular assertion. Once it has been established that 'Caesar was a dictator' was uttered assertively, we know (thanks to the semantics) what kind of thought the speaker is having, namely that it is a thought about Caesar, that it is a judgement, that the judgement is negative and so on (furthermore including all the entailments and logical consequences of what was said). But not until a serious intention has been fixed do the words count at all as being conducive to specific intentions. I could say, in response to 'I am Hume', 'And then I am Kant', without leading my hearers to assign me the thought that I am Kant. They know well that I never thought that, although I said it (in the *locutionary* sense of saying). They also know full well that I mean 'Look I don't believe you are Hume' and thus my thought is indirectly related to the words I uttered (but not in such a way that the words in the sentence can be considered constituents of the thought).

The intentions and the words, in some cases, are separate and the intentions flow from the contextual clues only. When the intentions and the words are not separate, but the words convey the thought of the speaker, in the sense that the speaker had a serious intention of having his thought expressed by his words, the thought is announced by the contextual clues which fix a serious intention and not by the words used. So, in a sense, the intentions are outside of the words used (see also Mey 2001): they are also related to the words (just in case the intention outside of the words can be established as a serious one).<sup>8</sup>

So, in a sense, pragmatics is that area of study which pertains to intentions to a greater extent, whereas semantics is related to intentions only through the aid of pragmatics. Does this mean that intentions are read telepathically? Of course the answer is negative, because even if the semantics may work through pragmatics, pragmatics, without semantics, would be too impoverished to reach the complexity of articulate thought. We could have no subordinate thoughts without semantics, no if-clauses, etc. So, on the one hand, semantics is indispensable for articulate thought, on the other hand, we could say that pragmatics is the structural element on which semantics is built.

## *2. Situations where the burden is on the semantics*

It may be held that the main tension between semantics and pragmatics is revealed by cases in which speakers (and their hearers) are bound by the exigency to reduce interpretative ambiguities. We may take the case of the law (legislative acts) as an extreme case where every effort is made to avoid ambiguity (interpretative or otherwise) and to reduce the interpretative options or choices that could be made by the hearer/reader. The kind of intentionality expressed by legislative acts is one that presupposes a perfect match between the intentions of the legislator and the interpretations of the readers<sup>9</sup>. So we imagine that a certain amount of prolixity or carefulness would be required to guarantee such a match and that context-sensitive elements, whenever possible, should be replaced with context-insensitive ones. We can very well imagine that pronouns are particularly insidious for the legislator – take the pronominal 'it'; this can be coindexed with any NP (noun phrase) available in the co-text, whether close by or further away. Only pragmatics can instruct the hearer to preferentially, coindex, a pronominal with a matching antecedent that is as close by as possible. And of course

pragmatics instructs the hearer/reader to choose an antecedent that makes the anaphoric link make sense – such that it conforms to most typical or stereotypical scenarios (Huang 1994). I assume that legal texts (as well as academic ones, sometimes) take pains to reduce interpretative latitude (or the interpretative options) by letting a pronominal be followed by some apposition clause that specifies the context to a greater extent, disambiguating it as far as possible. But is it possible to completely reduce all interpretative ambiguities? The answer is probably negative – and if this is the way things are, then it makes sense to argue that even legal texts require interpretation – an interpretation which should conform with the highest possible standards of rationality.

We can assume that the legislator is as rational as possible and we try to work out the most rational interpretations (Dascal and Wróblewski 1988). Here, we are not going into the details of the interpretation of legal texts. All we need is a case that shows the basic tension between semantics and pragmatics. We see them here pitted against one another. Semantics tries to reduce the burden that falls on pragmatics, and pragmatics takes over when it is clear that semantics is not enough.<sup>10</sup> Although speakers may want to make every effort to use semantics to express their thoughts, there is always some residue that requires pragmatic interpretation (and some residue of thought that has to be expressed through pragmatics in the absence of an alternative means). Now, in case we were tempted to say that semantics plays a more important role than pragmatics – given that pragmatics plays a complementary role here – we must be clear that the very impossibility of expressing all thoughts through semantics shows that pragmatics is needed to go beyond the possibility of semantics. The case just discussed shows the limits of semantics and that such limits can be overcome via pragmatics. So pragmatics is not only something that has to do with a residue, but something that allows us to transcend semantics.

### 3. *Situations where the burden is on pragmatics*

I have long been intrigued by the pragmatics of pidgins. Peter Mühlhäusler once gave me – well before its publication – a rough copy of a manuscript containing examples from Tok Pisin – a pidgin spoken in Papua New Guinea. The manuscript clearly showed a language whose users struggled hard to express their thoughts, in spite of the limited semantic resources. In the subsequent published version of the manuscript, Mühlhäusler and his co-authors remark that the "main function of the [coastal Bismarck archipelago and Samoan]plantations in this development was in stabilizing the unstable jargon English varieties known to the different recruits to form a standardized lingua franca" (Mühlhäusler et al. 2003, 5). Here, an ethnically very diverse population, living in a situation of contact, had to maximize their otherwise reduced semantic/syntactic resources by pragmatic amplification. When living in a situation where you only share an impoverished language with your conversational partners, you must make use of whatever known vocabulary to express concepts for which you have no words.

Consider this example (from Mühlhäusler et al. 2003, 41; all the Tok Pisin examples below are from the same source):

- (2) You save where this man stop?  
Do you know where this man stays?

I am interested the relationship between 'stay' and 'stop'. A person who stops somewhere, is someone who is likely to stay for a while. While staying is a logical consequence of 'stop' it is clearly not equivalent to stopping, as the latter requires one further semantic element (the transition from movement to rest). So we have a(n inverted) metonymic relationship between 'stopping' and 'staying', which is exploited in pragmatic inference. The interpretation of

'save' is more complicated. Could 'save' derive from French 'savez'? (Keith Allan (p.c.) considers this a possibility). Or could it be the case that 'knowing' is considered a sort of 'saving' (saving mental impressions, memories, etc.)?

Consider now the following:

- (3) He black fellow boy belong German consul. (p. 41)  
The black boy of the German consul.

The definite article is expressed through a deictic expression (a pronominal) which reminds us of the case of clitics in the Italian language, where pronominals add a definiteness effects to a certain NP (whether objectual or propositional). The preposition 'of' is expressed by 'belong' (a verb) capable of expressing a possessive relationship (the consul being the possessor).

Now consider the following:

- (4) Make open that fellow beer (p. 41)  
Open this beer bottle

This example is interesting because the imperative mood is expressed by the verb 'make' embedding the verb (which is supposed to be in the imperative mood). The bottle is referred to by 'fellow' which may be pragmatically interpreted as referring to an object of some kind which, by collocation with 'beer' and having access to an appropriate frame, could be interpreted as 'bottle'.

The imperative, however, could be expressed merely by using tone of voice (indicated below through an exclamation mark):

- (5) One fellow tamiok he come! (p. 47),  
(6) Bring me an axe!

Here, the verb 'bring' is expressed through 'come', which clearly expresses movement towards the speaker (Mühlhäusler et al. 2003, 49).

- (7) Yu no ken askim dispel askim (p. 15)  
 You should not

The modal 'ken' here is used with the meaning of 'should'. Similar semantic changes are noted by Traugott (2012).

The development of tense markers in Tok Pisin has attracted scholarly attention. The best known case is the reduction of the time adverbial 'baimbai' (from 'by and by', a future/irrealis marker: Mühlhäusler et al. 2003, 40) to the forms 'bai' and 'ba'.

The past can be merely expressed through the word 'finish', which may well indicate that an action took place (the event came to completion), as in the following:

- (8) Me-fellow work finish some-fellow Christmas b'long Rabaul  
 I have worked for several years in Rabaul.

(Here we can additionally notice that 'years' is expressed metonymically as 'Christmas' (being roughly the culmination of a year).

- (9) Dispela meri i toktok, lukim em i lap  
 This girl is talking, see how she is laughing

Notice that the name 'Mary' is used to express the concept of 'girl' (metonymy again); the concept of the present continuous is obtained iconically by reduplication (toktok).

The plural forms of 'us' and 'you' are obtained by using the corresponding, singular pronominals and attaching some elements, so

that the plural is formed by iconicity (yupela, mipela, for (exclusive) second, resp. first plural 'you', 'we': pp. 147, 171: see also Crowley 2008, 87 on reduplication as a way of expressing plurals in pidgins).

If-clauses are expressed by 'suppose' as in:

- (10) Kaikai no got, suppose you be English (p. 55).  
I have no food, if you are English

I think that we need a serious study of the texts collected by Mühlhäusler to reveal the role of pragmatics in amplifying impoverished semantic resources. Tok Pisin and similar pidgins can shed further light on the important role played by pragmatics in the development of language. Even in languages which appear to be fully developed like English or Italian, there is room for innovation. Given that technological innovations new discoveries, fresh theoretical paradigms, etc. are likely to change our lives every day, in linguistic too new resources are needed to express this potential array of (new) meanings. Pragmatics can be seen as a readily available and economical way of amplifying the existing resources.

#### *4. Cancellability of intentions*

The difference between semantic entailments and conversational implicatures/explicatures, according to the standard authorities (e.g. Carston 2002, 2010; Levinson 2000) is that the former are not cancellable (without contradicting what is said). The debate between Carston and Burton-Roberts has made it clear, among other things, that this dichotomy is not entirely plausible. While it might be acceptable to say that potential implicatures (and explicatures) are cancellable, it does not make much sense to say that particularized implicatures are cancellable. Since, in these latter, cases, intentions



are fixed through contextual clues, it becomes exceedingly hard (and uneconomical, according to Jaszolt 2005) to cancel an implicature (to un-implicate a message).

Paradoxically, to argue against the plausibility of the dichotomy we also find cases of entailments which can be cancelled, as in the case of

(11) I knew that *p* but *p* turned out to be false.

In this case, the utterance comes to mean 'I believed I knew that *p*, but *p* turned out to be false'. These are clearly cases of parasitic or loose uses (Strawson 1952). However, in this case, we have only a veneer of cancellability. To see that entailments are not cancellable (unless readjustments of meanings through the principle of Charity occur), consider the utterance: "Alessandro is bald but he is not bald". It is self-defeating (hence contradictory) to make such an assertion. Notice that the contradiction is more easily detected when a pronominal is used, because replacement of the pronominal with a proper name may tend to implicate (by an M-implicature à la Huang/Levinson) that the names are disjoint in reference.

What I find particularly interesting for the sake of the discussion on the tension between semantics and pragmatics is that explicatures can easily be shown to be uncancellable (implicated messages cannot be un-implicated). I held this position in Capone (2006, 2009 and forthcoming) for a number of reasons, both theoretical and empirical. In the present paper, I will take it as granted (or grantable) that in general explicatures cannot be cancelled (if they can be cancelled, they are either potential explicatures or, otherwise, merely conversational implicatures). So we have pragmatic inferences which resemble entailments, as entailments cannot be cancelled without contradiction of what is said. Pragmatic implicatures, by contrast, can be cancelled in some cases.

Suppose I make a long speech about my financial difficulties in Oxford, while studying as D.Phil. student and dwell at length on the University fees, college fees, accommodation fees, the cost of food, books, copybooks, etc. Then my sister, to whom I am speaking, might take this long tirade as evidence for the implicated message that I need further financial support. This is clearly a case where I can deny my intention (or my having had that intention) since although a number of clues could be mobilized to construct that intended meaning, there is no definitive or conclusive evidence that this is (or was) my communicative intention. Suppose now that I am the type of person who never asks for money and that my sister is much aware of this; consider furthermore that, presumably, knowledge of psychological states generally plays a role in non-monotonic inferences of the particularized type, this being the background knowledge on which inferential reasoning is based (see Perconti 2003, 100), then my message – if it was ever intended – could easily be retracted. One could argue that this is a case of weak, rather than, strong implicature and that only strong implicatures cannot be cancelled. Consequently, we may safely assume that the evidence in favor of a communicative intention can be either weak or strong. If it is strong, it becomes hard to cancel the implicature. If it is weak, it becomes easier to cancel the implicature. (See Wilson and Sperber 2012 on implicatures vs. weak implicatures).

Suppose now that when I say that implicatures or explicatures are not cancellable, I merely confine myself to strong implicatures/explicatures (actually my position is that explicatures are always cases of strong implicatures needed for structural reasons). It is clear that these implicatures or explicatures, in so far as they are not cancellable, resemble or **mimic semantic entailments**<sup>11</sup>. It is the nature (belongs to the essence) of entailments that they are not cancellable without contradiction of what is said and if contradiction is *prima facie* plausible as in example (2), we must add that the semantics gives way to a pragmatic interpretation that shifts the semantic

type of the verbal expression that is involved, (there is a pragmatic slide from 'knows' to 'believes he knows', due to the Principle of Charity). So why does pragmatics need to mimic semantics? Here we are clearly at places (loci) of the tension between semantics and pragmatics, and pragmatics needs to be semanticised to rescue a certain, otherwise ill-formed discourse (one which shows contradiction or logical absurdity).<sup>12</sup> Since cancelling the pragmatic inference implies returning to an ill-formed discourse, pragmatics must be semanticised and the inference has the status of an entailment. Since we defined an entailment as an inference that cannot be denied without contradiction of what is said, it is clear that explicatures are similar to entailments in one important respect (though not in all respects, as the pragmatic derivation still remains an important aspect of their calculability).

##### *5. The slide from pragmatics to semantics*

In Capone (2000), I studied verbs like Italian 'sapere' (know) and I concluded that these are regularly subject to semantic shift. Little by little the value of 'know' becomes corroded because, side by side with the legitimate sense of 'he knows', there exist parasitic meanings (like he 'believes he knows'), competing for the same semantic field. It is clear that these parasitic uses (formally hardly distinguishable from 'know' (or its translations into other languages) gradually corrode the meaning of 'know'. So much so that in Italian (and other, similar languages), 'sapere' (know) seems hardly distinguishable from 'believe', with the difference that 'know' in some cases still can be taken to imply true knowledge, while 'believe' seems to standardly implicate that someone does not know for certain that p.

In the present context. I want to divorce the discussion from philosophical considerations. Philosophers such as Hintikka have conceded that there are parasitic uses of 'know'<sup>13</sup>), but have been

adamant in claiming that 'know' implies the truth of the proposition known. Here linguistics may differ from philosophy in certain respects, by recognizing that in some languages the number of loose uses of 'sapere' (with the meaning of 'he believes he knows') is greater than in English. Since, after all, even in these languages the concept 'know' plays some role (crucial in philosophical discussions but also when it comes to scientific knowledge), we can predict that certain constructions may come to be used by those languages to stabilize the meaning of 'know'<sup>14</sup>. Such constructions are found in languages like Italian, Spanish, Modern Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Portuguese, Polish, Czech, etc. and can be represented by pronominal clitics (e.g. Italian *Lo sapevo che Mario non era stupido!* (literally 'I it knew that Mario was not stupid'), which have the function of making a knowledge claim stronger than it could be in case the pronominal clitic (*Lo*) is not used.

Elsewhere (Capone forthcoming b), I claim that either modal subordination (to a previous assertion in discourse) or an M-implicature is responsible for the epistemic strengthening of this verb which is undergoing a corrosion process (even in tv programs, news broadcast etc. you see the corrosion of verbs of knowledge). I will not further justify these positions here, but I do note that the M-implicature in these cases hardly seems to be cancellable; so much so that, if it were not for the granting of modal subordination, one could be easily deceived into thinking that the M-implicature is nothing but a semantic entailment. In any case, I am favourable to the idea that such an entailment (if posited) can be seen as an evolution over time, due to proximity of a pragmatic inference. So, in the case of clitics, we see a semantic change in progress some strategies aiming at stabilizing semantics employ elements that trigger pragmatic inferences, which then end up being semanticised. (The fact that the M-implicatures of pronominal clitics are semanticised of course supports the idea that clitics emerge to stabilize the meaning of 'sapere' (and similar cognitive verbs in Italian such as 'capire', 'sentire', etc.) The clitics

could not play this role, obviously, if their inferences could be cancelled. The fact that factivity and presuppositionality intersect is no strong obstacle to the idea that clitics serve to stabilize meaning since presuppositionality entails factivity.)

The pattern outlined here seems to be usual and predictable. In many cases, pragmatic inferences are stabilized (or standardized) by becoming default inferences and, then end up being incorporated into, semantics. But we must ask ourselves why this extra step is needed. After all, if Occam's Razor (however modified) is accepted, it must play a role in keeping pragmatics and semantics separate, pragmatics allowing us to obtain certain (additional) semantic readings for free. So why is it that, in due time, a pragmatic inference becomes semantic (often causing semantic ambiguity) contrary to the predictions of Occam's (modified) Razor (which tells us to prefer a more parsimonious analysis, one which postulates fewer entities, everything else being the same<sup>15</sup>)? For now, the answer to this dilemma must be that the circumstances may change and that an analysis which was preferable in certain circumstances will not be preferable in other circumstances.

Suppose, for instance that a language has an acute need for a concept which has become culturally salient (or is in the process of becoming culturally salient) and therefore a term/word is required to illuminate this cultural saliency. Clearly, in this case, the circumstances have changed: whereas, earlier, the concept could be obtained for free through pragmatics, now it has been sedimented in the language, it has become part of it and is associated with some culturally salient aspect of society which needs to be represented semantically. We can presuppose – without much argument – that all those aspects of social life which are culturally salient and important sooner or later become semanticised, that is, represented through a word in the language. This amounts to admitting that words have a double function; on the one hand they furnish concepts that may be used

for communication or transactions, on the other hand they represent sedimented traces of what is culturally important in a society (this is in agreement with Wong, 2010, it also recalls Sapir). It is clear that the shift from a pragmatic to a semantic inference has a cognitive cost (as a new lexeme has to be included in the language and must be memorized by its users), but the cost is counterbalanced by the cognitive effects – the term works as a flag or as an historical artifact: it tells us the story of the language and of its users, their mentality, their culture, and what was deemed of importance in that culture.

We know very well that many metaphors (have) become semanticised. What I said above shows us why this should be the case, despite 'prima facie' predictions by a modified Occam's Razor. In a further reflection on semanticisation and its implications, such implications can easily escape the 'everything else being equal' part of Occam's (modified) Razor, in particular considering the pressure of cognitive effects as a balancing of cognitive efforts.

#### *6. On the slide from principles of language use to rules*

One of the things which struck me most since the inception of my career in pragmatics and which I now would like, however imperfectly, to explain is that much of the behavior which is predicted by pragmatic principles (avoid ambiguity, choose less prolix expressions, be as informative as you can, be relevant) was taught us at secondary school in the form of rules pertaining to the well-formedness of discourse. Italian teachers have internalised the teachings of rhetoric and have imposed on us what was, *de rigueur*, only the result of obeying principles of language use found in Aristotle and many of his successors writing about rhetoric/oratory/style (Allan 2010). I assume that the same must have taken place elsewhere, at least in literate societies, like the British one.

The sliding from principles to rules requires that at some stage, we study the Gricean maxims' grammatical facets as part of our study of societal pragmatics, that is to say of the pragmatic rules imposed on us by society<sup>16</sup>. It is clear that rules carry greater normative force than principles. You follow a principle because you are persuaded of its utility, because there are certain advantages in following it which do not derive from an opportunistic following of the rules with the aim to be accepted in society. One could see the same maxims, now as principles of language use, now as rules – the rules of language games like writing or telling stories. I suggest that we study these different facets of the same issue separately and armed with different methodology.

Societal pragmatics deals with rules of use. Philosophical pragmatics has to deal with principles of usage. Consider the following example. For my new edited volume to be published by Springer. I sent out the style sheet to the contributors. In doing so, I was not aware that there were two sections, one for the social sciences and one for philosophy, humanities, etc. As a result, some authors conformed to one style sheet and some to the other. Although the differences were minimal, they were not negligible. One style sheet required only authors' initials, the other required full first names. One required, full stops after the author's first name and publication year, the other required rounded parentheses. As I said, the differences were minimal, but they prevented me from having a uniform result. I wrote to the authors again, saying that I felt I had made a mistake by not specifying exactly which style sheet they had to conform to (social sciences or philosophy), and asked them to redress the problem. Some authors replied that the style sheet actually explicitly said that either full names or abbreviated names could be used. At this point I thought that the mistake was not mine, but the publisher's who had composed an irregular style sheet, leading to a lack of uniformity in bibliographies. But could it really be the case that the publisher

intended to a lack of uniformity in the bibliographies in one and the same book? So, unlike some of my authors, I interpreted the style sheet as intending that the editors were free to choose either format but had stick to, the one chosen.

Now, clearly, we may see all this interpretative work as either descending from principles of language use (or from principles of cognition informing communication) or from discourse rules. I prefer to assume that in this case, a normative component was at work and that the editors were not allowed to interpret things as they wished, thereby allowing for a lack of uniformity in the bibliographies. Abiding by principles of language use allowed one some latitude which, in practice, was not possible, as one could literally interpret the style sheet as saying that the authors could opt for full or abbreviated names. Such a literal interpretation was not licit, as everybody knows that, in academic publications, uniformity of bibliographies is a must. Lack of uniformity could easily lead to a negative evaluation of the work by a punctilious reviewer. Thus, the rules of academic discourse prevailed over the literal interpretation of discourse. And this, of course, reinforced the impression that by presenting different bibliographies under headings such as Social Sciences and Philosophy would have led authors to a multiplicity of behaviors. Principles of language use prescribe minimizing ambiguity or obscurity. But in this case – the context of academic writing – I prefer to see this as a matter of obeying discourse rules prescribing that when you write you should not be obscure. The differences between the two approaches may be minimal – but they ultimately mean that rules of discourse should be investigated in connection with societal pragmatics and language games. In the language game of writing a collective book, both the editors and the authors must collaborate by following the rules of the game. Avoiding ambiguity and following the standard of high quality academic publications could thus be considered the rules of this particular language game.



Before concluding this section, I want to reflect on one further thing, relating to the section's general point. We could argue that the maxim prescribing that one should avoid repetition works with the same effectiveness both in English and in Italian. To some extent, we are willing to concede that violations of 'Be brief' lead to conversational implicatures or improprieties both in English and Italian texts. Again we could see this as a maxim of language use or the result of applying a cognitive principle to communication. (A repetitive verbal contribution clearly implies greater cognitive efforts than do those involved in contextual effects).

But why is it that in Italian (especially in academic publications), repetition is avoided like the plague, while in English texts it is tolerated to some extent, especially if it serves to avoid ambiguity? There appears to be a genuine clash between the maxim 'Be brief' and the maxim 'Avoid ambiguity' and this clash is resolved in English by keeping both maxims while establishing a hierarchy in those cases where the need to avoid ambiguity is greater than the need to avoid repetition. In Italian, the preference for good style has won over the preference for maximizing informativeness. Given that, after all, with some additional extra effort, contextualization allows one to get the correct reading, one can always opt for style. But then the difference between British and Italian texts appears to mirror different preferences. For the British, who are more pragmatic, quantity of information wins over style; in Italian, style is most important and clarity is sacrificed, even in view of the fact that contextualization can, with a little extra effort, clarify what was intended. Style then wins over quantity of information – and this conforms to cultural clichés about the social dimensions of the Italian language. Unless we keep the social dimensions in mind, we are at loss to explain the differences between the two languages as regards their preferences. So should we settle on maxims of language use (or cognitive principles governing communication) or on rules of discourse determining

language games? I would probably say that a multidimensional approach is needed, as a text is constrained by both the maxims of language use and the rules characterizing language games.

In my doctoral thesis (Capone 1998). I was fascinated by James Higginbotham's idea (p.c.) that temporal sequence could provide the correct interpretation of conjoined sentences (sentences conjoined by 'and') following a rule operating in story-telling. An obvious problem here was the fact that 'and' is not only used in stories but also in speech acts. Perhaps the problem could be resolved by considering speech acts as instructions to build possible stories. The nice thing about Higginbotham's idea is that, being language games (with an aim to inform, entertain, distract, etc.) stories need rules anyway. Thus, the idea that conjunction allows for a temporal sequence interpretation is in line with the general notion that stories have rules (classically they need beginnings stressing newsworthiness, endings bringing home the moral, etc.). Again we are faced with the alternative of considering the temporal sequence interpretation the result of principles of language use or the result of rules of discourse<sup>17</sup> – a dilemma which at the time puzzled me, but does so no longer. The reason is that, as we have seen in many cases there can be a 'sliding' from pragmatics to semantics. While the notion of sliding is usually applied to the discourse *rules*, I claim that also here we may observe a sliding from pragmatics to semantics.

The Italian teachers' obsession with relevance, avoidance of repetition, clarity, etc. seems to support the idea that a sliding from principles of language use to discourse rules is justified in specific areas of discourse where there are advantages to glean from obeying the discourse rules. One of the obvious advantages of rules is that (by contrast to principles of language use) they can be taught. – It clearly does not make sense to teach rules of use as ways of solving coordination problems since they constitute the *a priori* forms of

communication and are easily inferable on grounds of rationality in other words, they are part of the cognitive make-up of the human mind and thus constitute *a priori* forms of communication that are hard-wired in the human mind. And indeed, if principles of language use are hard-wired or easily inferable, it does not make sense to teach them. However, if there is a sliding from principles of language use to discourse rules, it is clear that it makes sense to teach the discourse rules. Furthermore, given that we have allowed that principles of language use and specific discourse rules applying to specific domains (e.g. academic discourse) coexist side by side, it is not impossible that teaching discourse rules reinforces the tendency to apply principles of language use or, in the case of principles of language use of a cognitive nature, it helps to apply them properly<sup>18</sup>.

But is not the parallel coexistence of principles of language use with discourse rules a logical monstrosity given that it would introduce unbearable redundancy? This is by no means, a trivial problem. However, first off we are actually capable of differentiating principles of language use from discourse rules. Discourse rules apply to a specific domain whereas the scope of principles of language use is much wider and more general. Second, in the same way as we would not want to say that an inference that becomes semanticised violates the (modified) Occam's Razor (because this grammaticalization serves to flag the cultural significance of the inference in question), we would not want to say that a system having principles of language use and of discourse uses running in parallel is merely redundant without additional cognitive effects. Discourse rules attest to the fact that a language game of a specific type is involved – knowing the rules amounts to being able to play that language game. Furthermore, as in the case of the difference between English and Italian texts, in the use of repetition the different language games and their different rules may place greater or lesser emphasis on certain cultural aspects; thus discourse rules may flag a certain language game as being part of a culture. The right perspective is not one that sees grammati-

calization of principles of language use as introducing redundancy, rather it should see the process as introducing a double articulation. In this perspective and at a more abstract level, we can see discourse mechanisms as obeying the principles of language use while at a more concrete level, discourse rules are needed to flag a language game as being part of more global and culture-oriented language games. Overall the discourse rules probably signal the embedding of a language game into wider language games.

Discourse rules are an essential part of the praxis of language games and the teaching of such rules is a way of making the praxis available to others by way of introducing them to the rules. You learn a language game by playing it, the teacher who corrects a paper for a student makes the student participate in a praxis in which playing the language game is essential (see Lo Piparo 2010). But principles alone do not explain the dexterity and expertise with which learners adopt a given practice. Other factors must be mobilized, such as attention, the ability to spot certain unwanted characteristics, analytic abilities, etc. Teaching a practice can be best exemplified by the example of the natural scientist who teaches students how to distinguish the various parts of say a cell; for the teaching to be effective, she or he must add praxis to the general principles offered during the lecture. Only after having practiced along with the teacher, what has been learnt in class, will the students be capable of distinguishing the cell's different elements. Teachers must allow the students to make mistakes and they should be prepared to correct their mistakes as often as is necessary.

### *7. On pragmatics and culture*

In this section, I will argue that for pragmatic principles to work properly and produce their effects, they need to interact with the

discourse rules that pertain to particular languages. Speakers, in other words, must have a sensitivity both to general principles of language use and to what is appropriate behaviour within a certain (linguistically bound) community of language users.

I have already pointed to the ironclad connection between pragmatics and culture, a connection that is not easily noticed if one concentrates on pragmatics and philosophy alone. I am happy to incorporate Wong's (2010) notion of the 'triple articulation' of language (a conception for which he is much indebted to Anna Wierzbicka), into my rethinking of the relationship between pragmatics and culture. In particular I have pointed out some ways in which culturally salient concepts play a role in grammaticalization, and I have even (albeit rather timidly) hypothesised that the same concept may lead to different inferential (metaphorical) outcomes in different languages, depending on culture and its constraints.

A significant difference between Wong's work and my own is that he sees the pragmatic enterprise and the enterprise of cultural analysis as proceeding along separate different paths. I have tried to reconcile general principles of language use with the norms operating in discourse (some of which have to do with culture or are affected by culture), and have shown that, while principles of language use make the same predictions about use in all languages, different cultures may modulate discourse norms in different ways. By contrast Wong (2010), thinks that an approach based on principles of language use and universal inferences leads to conclusions that are different from and presumably even contradict, those reached when using a culture-based perspective on pragmatic inference.

Wong produces various examples in which a request (in the form of a question) is followed by (i.e. elicits) a reply which according to 'Anglo' standards count as irrelevant. Here is one of his examples from Singapore English:

(12)

A: Do you want me to come to sign something now?

B: Can, can<sup>19</sup>.

Wong comes to the conclusion (too hastily, in my opinion) that Relevance is not a working category in Singapore English, simply because the reply seems to count as irrelevant by English standards, according to which an answer such as, 'Yes' would count as being (more) relevant. However, the conventions of language use in Singapore English make 'can can' a perfectly suitable reply, one that indicates willingness to cooperate with the request. Wong writes, that in accordance with a 'cultural script' operating in Singapore English, a speaker is predisposed to conceptualise a 'yes' in terms of 'can', irrespective of its lack of relevance from an Anglo perspective. In this case, the answer 'can can' implies that the speaker sees the proposition as a good option and is prepared to go along with it.

One could ask why this pragmatic move should be deemed irrelevant in the first place. The fact that the reply could look irrelevant to English speakers is not of importance to us, because relevance is always a balance of contextual implications and cognitive effects. So, in order to make the utterance 'Can can' relevant enough, one must presumably account for the way its potential obscurity (compared to a succinct reply such as 'Yes') is offset by potential contextual implications, one may contemplate the action from the rational perspective of what can be done, with little effort ('I can do this'), rather than from a volitional perspective ('I want to do this'). If the contextual implications offset the cognitive efforts, relevance is achieved – and that is all that is needed.

In any case, it does not take much to accommodate Wong's important considerations within a more unified picture, aiming to integrate particular societal/cultural conditions with a universal pragmatics. I have suggested before that a two-pronged scheme

is possible: universal pragmatics works in tandem with societal pragmatics, which obviously adds a cultural dimension. Resorting to cultural scripts, like the one proposed by Wong, is certainly important, and helps us understand how the integration of universal pragmatics and societal pragmatics can proceed.

### *8. Conclusion*

I see the tension between semantics and pragmatics in the following, more or less cyclical, way. We may hypothesise that at some primitive stage, pragmatics was all that was needed to communicate. In the absence of words, communicative intentions could be expressed through gestures, grunts, shouting, tone of voice, gaze, etc. Even after words came into being, pragmatics remained ubiquitous: its role was now to boost the potential of the communicative system, by drastically extending the words' existing meanings. In our present-day use of explicatures, pragmatics mimics semantics and appropriates its truth-conditional (entailment-like) apparatus. Pragmatic inferences then become semanticised and we have come full circle. Following this, another cycle of pragmatic extension may be observed, by which pragmatic principles slide towards grammaticalization. For now this is the end of the story.

### **Notes**

1. I would like to give thanks to Tullio De Mauro, who made me think of this topic by his stimulating considerations. I would also like to thank Jacob L. Mey, Istvan Kecskes, Franco Lo Piparo, Jock Wong and Yan Huang for their positive feedback and encouragement throughout these years. I would also like to give thanks to Keith Allan, who has generously commented on a draft of this paper.
2. See Capone (2010), Introduction to Pragmemes.

3. Of course, this is reminiscent of Lewis' ideas (on convention).
4. Also see Mey 2001, p. 43 on the paradox of conventionality vs. spontaneity.
5. See also Traugott and Dasher (2002, 4) on groups trying to claim some words for themselves (e.g. Yankee, Queer, Nappy). Or see redefinitions of words by legislative acts (e.g. 'harassment') (Traugott and Dasher 2002, 4).
6. Keith Allan (p.c.) thinks this is an oversimplification: this may be mostly true but there are thoughts which have an indeterminated truth value. I suppose Allan has in mind cases like the one discussed by Peter Strawson in his famous paper 'On Referring'.
7. See Wierzbicka 2006 and Wong 2010 for important work on language and culture. On the grammaticalization of pragmatic inferences see Grice (1989), Traugott (2002, 2004, 2012), Levinson (2000) (in particular the evolution of reflexives out of marked pronominal forms in old English), Nicolle (1998), Ariel (2008).
8. Here we could also accommodate Kecskes' (2012) view that the speaker's intentions may include shadows of meaning that are private and in need of being made explicit through recourse to clues that allow us to transform a private act of *parole* (differing significantly from other apparently similar speech acts) into an act that can be expressed through the public language (even if it is not actually so expressed, but only grasped at the level of inference).
9. I use 'the legislator' aware of the potential attributive/referential ambiguity. A legal text – such as a law – is different from other texts, because the individual intentions of the actual legislator (the person) can be superseded in case it can be proven that a certain interpretation (however different from the one the person had in mind in making the law) is more rational. The lawmaker is an entirely depersonalized entity, one who acts according to rationality and to whom, it always is reasonable to attribute, the most rational intention that can be reconstructed.
10. Keith Allan (p. c.) sees a potential problem here, since I granted that pragmatics is phylogenetically prior; so how come that semantics is prior to pragmatic in interpretation? Presumably, I am committed to there being some kind of directionality in the interpretation process. Although I exclude that there is a discourse rule to the effect that one should start



with semantics and then proceed with pragmatic interpretation, I think it can be easily granted that the directionality principle works with indexical expressions and with the majority of lexical expressions that are subject to pragmatic enrichment. Semantics, however incomplete, is required to direct/guide, the interpretation process. We need something, which interacts with context to produce semantic values, and this cannot clearly be pragmatic, as it needs to be stable enough to produce a principled interaction with contexts. Pragmatic interpretations, by contrast, are not stable as they vary with contexts.

11. I was told that it might be easier in this case to talk about semanticisation of the pragmatics. In a sense I agree and in a sense I do not. Traugott (2012) has shown that semanticisation may take even long periods of time to take place. All I believe is that these loci of the tension between semantics and pragmatics show (or could be taken to show) that semanticisation is taking place.
12. One of the many examples that can be supplied is 'You will not die from this cut said by a mother to a child. She does not mean 'You will never die', but 'You will not die from this cut'. (This example originates from Kent Bach's 2001 seminal paper on implicature, see Carston 2002 for similar examples.
13. This is simply a technical use of the term 'know' and its translation equivalents.
14. Curiously enough, I found the case of the use of the indefinite article in stabilizing an older meaning of the verb (not the noun) 'baiser' (Fr.), whose meaning has shifted from 'kiss' to 'fuck' (Horn 2011). So, it appears that a language has ways to stabilize meaning in the face of an ongoing language change. Furthermore, such strategies attest to the fact that the change is still going on (we are in a phase in which the semanticisation is not complete). [also Allan and Burridge 1991, p. 18.].
15. However, notice that not all linguists take polysemy as a direction opposite to linguistic economy:  
 "Far from being a defect of language, polysemy is an essential condition of its efficiency. If it were not possible to attach several senses to one word, this would mean a crushing burden on our memory: we would have to possess separate terms for every conceivable subject we might want to talk about. Polysemy is an invaluable factor of economy and flexibility in language; what is astonishing is not that the machine oc-

asionally breaks down, but that it breaks down so rarely". (Ullmann 1962: 167-168).

16. It could be argued that the Gricean maxims are not rules but directions for best behavior. I have no quarrel with this, but there are context such as, e.g. academic discourse where they have led to discourse rules.
17. I found similar ideas – albeit more radical – in a paper by Wayne Davis (2012) in which he similarly considers the possibility that implicatures or explicatures are of a conventional type. The difference between Davis' approach and mine is presumably that I tend to place emphasis on the conventionalization process: also I concede that in my approach, an initial calculability has to be granted. Moreover I tie conventionalization in with certain domains of discourse – thus I agree that in general the conversational implicature analysis is to be preferred.
18. It may be appear that there is a tension between a modular account (according to which pragmatic uses flow from principles of language use, presumably cognitive predispositions of the human mind) and one based on modularization (Karmiloff-Smith 1992), according to which a module is built up on the basis of experience (and generalizations). This apparent redundancy may be explained in the following way. Just as redundancy is built into the perceptive system to guarantee that it is maximally efficient and that if damage to an organ should prevent the perceptual system from working, there is another organ ready to replace it (we have two hands, two ears, two eyes, all furnishing tactile and other sensations), so the predisposed modular faculty of discourse construction and its modularized experiential counterpart both allow human beings to cope with the devastating effects of strokes, which notoriously affect certain parts of the brain and prevent the faculties located there from working properly.
19. Meaning: It can be like that.

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