LUDMILA URBANOVÁ, ON EXPRESSING MEANING IN ENGLISH CONVERSATION. SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY

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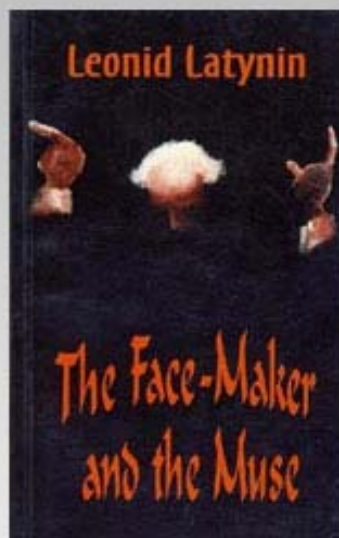
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REVIEWS
BESPRECHUNGEN
COMPTES RENDUS
RESEÑAS

LUDMILA URBANOVÁ,
ON EXPRESSING MEANING IN ENGLISH
CONVERSATION.
SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY
Masarykova univerzita v Brně. Spisy Filo-
zofické fakulty č. 345.
Vydavatelství Masarykovy univerzity v Brně,
2003, 121 pp.

An original Czech output in the area of
conversation analysis, discourse analysis
and pragmatics is relatively scarce and is
mostly limited to journal papers, therefore
the appearance of Ludmila Urbanová's mo-
nograph is most welcome. In her own words
the primary objective of her research is
a comparison between indeterminacy phe-
nomena in different conversation genres,
namely face-to-face exchange, telephone
conversation and radio interviews. Her ma-
terial is drawn from the corpus of spoken
text (A Corpus of English Conversation,
Dpt. of English Section of the Survey of
Spoken English, Lund University). The
manifestations of semantic indeterminacy
(SI henceforth) examined include *indirect-
ness, impersonality, attenuation, accentua-
tion* and *vagueness*. Wider theoretical as-
pects relating to her topic are dealt with in
three introductory chapters, though refer-
ences to theoretical issues run through the
whole text and appear also in the next five
chapters devoted to each of the SI phenom-
ena. The study winds up with an attempt to
outline the principles of systematic descrip-
tion of the indeterminacy patterns and re-
lated manifestations that could result in
a grammar-based approach.

Chapter 1, On Conversational Language,
outlines the aims and methods and focuses
on the differences between written and spo-
ken language (functions of the spoken lan-
guage, the role of the context, etc.). Next, it
covers the basic notions and principles, i.e.
cooperative and politeness, operating in
conversation, and offers the preview of SI as
intentional illocutionary opacity, reflecting
the speaker's attitude. Chapter 2, Form and
Meaning in Conversation, surveys the per-
ceptions and comments relevant to the de-
scription of meaning in conversation, draw-
ing on Halliday's framework of function,
medium and form.[1] Attention is paid to the
specific formal structuring of conversation
and its basic unit. The author appears to
embrace the view of the clause being the
basic unit of syntax and a carrier of mean-
ing, though it "can be argued that a certain
proportion of conversational structure is
non-clausal." Chapter 3, Meaning in Con-
versation Revisited, addresses the subject of
meaning in conversation from interactional
aspects, contrasting sentence/utterance, co-
operation/politeness, form/function, con-
text/co-text and the speaker/hearer relation.
It reframes the notion of SI as subjective
meaning dominant in authentic, sponta-
neous informal conversation, as epistemic
remoteness expressed via the speaker's at-
titude to the state of knowledge and relates
it to its pragmatic setting. In this connection
the author claims that the most frequent dis-
course tactic aims at eliciting confirmation.

46

Although the five SI strategies are the pillars of the study, and their constitutive role for achieving SI is taken for granted (see pp. 11, 26, and the definitions on pp. 28–29), it is not clear whether these concepts and their classification have been established as a result of the author's own research, or whether they derive from some previous and generally accepted descriptions. This lack of explicit statement markedly contrasts with the otherwise very cautious presentation of other concepts and frequent references to sources throughout the whole study. We may also ask which other categories apart from these five might have been included as well. Another point concerns the use of the notion of politeness, appearing throughout the book, which sometimes appears to refer to politeness proper, sometimes it is contrasted with self-protection, and in some cases it seems to imply both. Also, there is a certain clash between how the appropriateness-politeness relationship is presented in Chapter 1 (p. 16) and Chart 2 (p. 41).

Chapter 4, Indirectness and Implicitness, first discusses indirectness in terms of the direct/indirect speech act relation before making a distinction between indirectness and implicitness as the encoding and the decoding process respectively. It proceeds to touch on their various aspects (e.g. socio-cultural context, the role of intonation, or emotiveness vs. informativeness) and then focuses on questions as one of the most frequent forms of indirect elicitation means. For the purposes of her analysis of indirectness in the act of inquiry the author makes use of Stenström's classification of question forms[1] (*wh-*, *yes/no*, alternative and declarative questions and question tags) which she expands by the inclusion of question phrases (with question embedding verbs), (implicitly interrogative) *if*-clauses

and (question) chains. She also proposes her own classification of question (discourse) functions (i.e., information-seeking, confirmation, agreement, commitment, repetition, clarification). Her hypothesis as to the close link between the conversation genre and the degree of indirectness, tested on seven texts, has been confirmed: face-to-face conversation shows the highest degree of indirectness and the widest range of question types; both decrease in telephone conversation and even more in (formal) interviews. The results indicate that indirect speech acts are a dominant feature in asking situations in face-to-face informal conversation.

Chapter 5, Impersonality, defines impersonality as an intentional expression of illocutionary opacity with regard to speaker/hearer identity at the level of interaction. It uses Chafe's tenor-related concepts of involvement with and detachment from the audience. In addition, it connects the speaker/addressee roles, which may be foregrounded or backgrounded, with the formality-informality scale and arrives at a four-stage classification of interpersonal-relation presentation (informal/personal, semi-personal, formal/depersonalised, formal/impersonal) with corresponding means of expression (*I-you>we-they>one-people> passive, there is*). The shift towards formality is accompanied by generalization and self-protection. This framework is applied in the analysis of interviews which shows that impersonality is a typical feature here, with nominal clauses prevalent or even reinforced through accumulation of impersonal means.

Chapter 6, Attenuation, presents attenuation (or hedging) as the modification of the illocutionary force by its weakening in face-threatening situations, gives two functions of attenuation (referential – lack of

commitment to truth conditions or lack of judgement competence; affective or attitudinal – adherence to social norms, judgement disclaiming for social reasons) and proposes a classification of attenuation markers or types (such as negative and positive politeness, unspecified reference, self-evaluation, afterthought, sarcasm, contradiction, etc.). The results of analyzing two face-to-face conversations show that the commonest type of attenuation is negative politeness, assumption (*I suppose*), non-commitment, detachment and unspecified reference.

Chapter 7, Accentuation, discusses the attenuation/accentuation relation in terms of illocutionary force gradation with attenuated, i.e. indirect and implicit, meaning at one end and accentuated, reinforced, explicit meaning at the other. Presumably, the author includes accentuation among SI phenomena because of its complementary nature with attenuation and the fact that besides sharing fuzziness and opacity of the force expressed they may even use the same devices (*I think*). Three groups of accentuation markers are distinguished – conative hearer-oriented boosters (emphatizers – *you see, you know*), expressive speaker-oriented boosters (assurances, attitudinals – *I mean*) and textual/cohesive discourse-organizers (*actually*). The results of the analysis of three samples (face-to-face conversation) show emphatizers/emphasizers to be the most frequent type and reveal a variety of accentuation-marker functions.

Chapter 8, Vagueness, describes vagueness as obscurity of word meaning (expression) to be distinguished from ambiguity (involving distinct meanings). While the previous SI phenomena belong to the discourse level (utterance meaning), vagueness/precision operates at the sentence level meaning (i.e. the conventional meaning of lexical items). What relates vagueness and

the other SI phenomena is the similarity of their function (intentional illocutionary opacity). The author lists four reasons for conventional vagueness (self-defence and self-protection, negative politeness, informality seeking and persuasive use). The analysis is based on 24 telephone conversations and Channell's classification of speaker meanings.[1] Vagueness is found to be most frequently associated with abundance/lack of information, persuasion, self-protection and politeness. The author also relates vagueness and speech act types and not surprisingly finds the lack of the information/statement link to be the most common. In conclusion the pragmatic advantages of vagueness in face-to-face conversation are pointed out.

The two final, brief chapters deal with attendant theoretical and methodological issues: 9. Meaning Potential in Conversation touches on the relationship between genre/degree of indirectness and SI/modality; 10. Corpus Linguistics and Probabilistic Grammar discusses the advantages and problems of computer data processing (such as text selection) and SI vs. grammar.

In relation to the goals mentioned in Chapters 9 and 10, a reference can be made back to Chapters 1 and 2. In section 1.3 the author sets her goal as being "to analyse patterns of semantic indeterminacy operating at the level of the utterance and the word" (p. 15). However, in section 2.4 "Delimiting the Basic Unit of Spoken Discourse", the notion of utterance is not explained. Since the aim of the study is "probabilistic grammar", the delimitation of a unit, motivated by the author's research needs, would be expedient. The examples provided throughout her account of the forms contributing to SI suggest that it is speaker turns that serve as units (rather than clauses – see above). Because one of the

48

goals pursued is comparison of the degree of indirectness in different conversation genres, the ratios of turns (tone units or words) vs. frequency of indeterminacy phenomena could be a useful way of comparing the texts under examination (e.g. in Table 2, p. 47). On the other hand, the lack of precise quantitative results does not make the presented account of SI phenomena less valuable, because its main value consists in presenting a thorough description and methodology for the study of these phenomena. As is inevitable in semantico-pragmatic studies, the fuzziness between individual interpretative categories is an inherent problem, and the treatment of SI, too, can hardly avoid it, viz. the cline attenuation-accentuation, or the view of depersonalization as one of the markers of attenuation (p. 63), but also a category on its own (impersonality in Chapter 5).

In a second edition the text would benefit from being rid of small oversights and inconsistencies. For instance, on p. 11 it is claimed that indications of the character of the individual texts and some of the texts in the full version are included. Actually only one text, S.1.4, is presented there, characterized only as a face-to-face conversation and the characterization appears elsewhere (under the discussions of the separate indeterminacy phenomena). On p. 12 Diane Blakemore (1992) is quoted, but not in Works Cited (i.e. references); a similar omission occurs with Chafe (1982, p. 50), Hoffmanová (1994, p. 80) and Aarts (1991, pp. 88–89).

Nonetheless there is no doubt that Urbanová's monograph provides a very good introduction to the subject of meaning in conversation and yields a number of new, fresh observations. It is closely structured and accessibly written. Although not a bulky publication, it is exceptionally rich in infor-

mation. Apart from its research goals, it may be described as having a distinct didactic potential in that its survey of the positions of different authors relevant to the subject in one way or another is quite exhaustive. As a whole, the monograph is a useful contribution to the analysis of spoken language and significantly enriches our understanding of the workings of SI in English conversation, such as the differences between the SI means and the degree of their exploitation in various conversation genres.

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N o t e

[1] Halliday, M. A. K.: *Spoken and written language.* Oxford University Press, 1990.
Stenström, A. B.: Questions and Responses in English Conversation. In: *Lund Studies in English* 68, Lund, 1984.
Channell, J.: *Vague Language.* Oxford University Press, 1994.

STANISLAV J. KAVKA
A BOOK ON IDIOMATOLOGY
University of Žilina, Slovakia, 2003, 150 pp.

The importance of idioms in learning a foreign language is not put in doubt by any teacher. Idioms are recognized as a necessary part of the inventory of linguistic means and the knowledge and appropriate use of idioms is considered to be a manifestation of the student's attaining a higher level of the foreign language acquisition.

Idioms are often treated as something lacking a system, something not following, or even going against the rules of the language, something that cannot be subjected to analysis, they are regarded as fossilized