Carston, Robyn (2002), *Thoughts and Utterances. The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Blackwell Publishing.

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The book is made up of four main chapters plus an introduction, two <u>appendices</u>, references and indexes.

In the **introduction**, the fundamental assumptions on which the relevance-theoretic approach is grounded are sketched. The author illustrates the Relevance Theoretic notion of Pragmatics as a capacity of the mind, a real information-processing system for "interpreting human ostensive communicative behaviour" (p.4) . In this sense, pragmatics stops being just an addition to natural language semantics and becomes a real object of study itself, although maintaining strict interaction with semantics. In this cognitive pragmatic approach, the semantics/pragmatics interface is connected to the distinction between two strictly interrelated cognitive processes, namely, semantic decoding and pragmatic inference.

In the **1st chapter**, "**Pragmatics and Linguistic Underdeterminacy**", the author starts by illustrating the distinction between linguistic meaning, encoded by linguistic forms, and speaker's meaning. A comprehensive survey of the most studied linguistic phenomena showing saying/meaning divergences is provided. All the cases described support the hypothesis that it is necessary for a hearer to undertake a process of pragmatic inference which allows him/her to understand what the proposition expresses and what the speaker implicates. This hypothesis is further developed into the "Underdeterminacy Thesis": "the linguistic semantics of the utterance, that is the meaning encoded in the linguistic expressions used, […], underdetermines the proposition expressed (what is said)" (p.19-20). The Underdeterminacy Thesis is illustrated in detail and the alternative hypotheses on linguistic ambiguities and reference assignment (especially those pertaining to the truth-conditional semantics and to the logico-philosophical tradition) are considered, compared and, when possible, integrated via a relevance-theoretic reinterpretation of compatible questions. Some other proposals are refuted in a lucid, articulate way. Many sources of linguistic underdeterminacy and several pragmatic strategies employed by the hearer in order to arrive at the correct interpretation are illustrated, such that underdeterminacy is finally defined as an essential feature of the relation between linguistic expressions and the thoughts they are used to express. The author proposes her strong "essentialist view", comparing her position with other weaker views on the question and refuting several philosophical principles allowing for the possibility of "eternal reference" and "eternal predication". Carston illustrates the relevance-theoretic model for communication, underlying the primacy of the human capacity to infer the mental states of others and to attribute them through the pragmatic inferential capacity. She recognises the fundamental role of the Background (in a version similar to Searle's Background) and concludes that underdeterminacy is not only an inalienable characteristic of linguistically encoded meaning but of thought in general.

The **2nd chapter**, "**The Explicit/Implicit Distinction**", like the first chapter, deals with theoretical issues concerning the semantics/pragmatics and the explicit/implicit distinctions. The author analyses different ways in which the distinction between the proposition explicitly expressed by a speaker and

the implicated propositions can be determined. Moreover, she defines which are the different levels which play a role in a cognitive pragmatic account of the representations and processes required in the interpretation of an utterance.

She comments on different views of the explicit/implicit distinction in verbal communication held by other linguists and philosophers and this critical survey provides strong support for her argumentation. The guiding thread of the discussion is Grice's pivotal work, and other theorists' views are considered insofar as they support, modify or react against his positions.

Carston starts from Grice's approach to the "saying" and "implicating" distinction. First, she provides a survey of Grice's theory about "what is said", the complete propositional (truth-conditional) content of the basic speech-act of an utterance, and "what is implicated" and then she describes the relevance-theoretic explicature/implicature distinction, which is considered a distinction between two different ways of deriving communicated assumptions.

Explicatures are defined as ostensively communicated assumptions inferentially developed from one of the linguistically given logical forms encoded by the utterance. They are further specified to include in the account several types of "subutterances", although the central concepts of ostensive communication and pragmatic enrichment maintain their primacy. Explicatures are then made distinct from the "propositions expressed", which, within the relevance-theoretic approach, are connected with an idea of a "representational level of explicit content that may not be communicated (speaker-meant)" (p.133). Following the argumentation developed throughout the first two chapters, Carston starts casting some doubt on the necessity for different explicatory levels other than the encoded logical form, explicatures and other contextual enrichments. This strong conclusion will be drawn in the final chapter.

Implicatures are defined as ostensively communicated assumptions which are derived exclusively by pragmatic inference and they are further divided in implicated premises and implicated conclusions. In Carston's account, only Gricean "conversational implicatures" figure (and they are considered an aspect of the proposition expressed), while phenomena categorized as "conventional implicatures" are usually considered as procedural constraints on inferential processes whose conceptual content is supplied by pragmatic inference and are compared with the relevance-theoretic notion of "procedural meaning". Following the underdeterminacy thesis, the author also rejects the distinction between particularized and generalized implicatures, in favour of a continuum going from occasional context-dependent cases to those cases which are generally present in the vast majority of contexts and for which very specific contextual circumstances are required in order to be blocked.

Carston illustrates the global comprehension process as postulated by the Relevance Theory and adds further specifications building on her underdeterminacy thesis. Once an utterance is uttered, it carries its own presumption of relevance. The hearer can retrieve the intended meaning relying on the so-called "relevance theoretic comprehension strategy". The first step is the decodification of the ostensive stimulus, in order to derive the logical form, an incomplete conceptual representation with variables whose value must be fixed, and with slots to fill in. Tentative interpretive hypotheses concerning the intended referents are made on-line and subsequently confirmed or rejected, according to whether they contribute or not to the interpretation which meets the expectation of relevance, that is, considering interpretations in order of accessibility and stopping when the expected level of relevance is reached. The logical form is so pragmatically developed through processes of disambiguation, saturation and free enrichment (explicature/implicature).

The author's position in favour of the underdeterminacy thesis is finally outlined through a critical survey of several accounts provided by outstanding voices from the philosophical and linguistic field of research.

Travi's, Recanati's and Bach's proposals concerning the comprehension process and more specifically the saying/implicating distinction are analysed and integrated in Carston's account or progressively discarded. The level of the Gricean "what-is-said", intended as a minimal proposition, is finally put

aside in favour of a three-level account of the representations and processes required in the interpretation of utterances (logical form, saturation and free enrichment), although the possibility for the necessity of a fourth representational level in a philosophical-semantic analysis is left open.

In the **3rd** and **4th chapter**, **"The Pragmatics of 'And'-Conjunction"** and **"The Pragmatics of Negation"**, the underdeterminacy thesis is applied to the analysis of two of the most studied phenomena within the logico-semantic tradition.
In both cases, Carston demonstrates that the relations expressed by 'and' and the fixation of the negation scope are pragmatically determined. The semantics of these natural language operators only provides a minimal framework, which needs being pragmatically augmented and complemented by inferential mechanisms contributing to the explicit content of the utterance.
The account provided by the author is strongly cognitively oriented, and it is based on the hypothesis concerning the ways in which the human mind conceives of the world and organises and stores encyclopaedic knowledge. According to this perspective, some relations are typical of the human cognitive system (i.e. cause-consequence relation), while other ones are developed out of our experience of the world (i.e. temporal relations).
Chapters 3 and 4 open up the way for the possibility of pushing even further the underdeterminacy thesis and of positing the existence of a process of on-line concept construction, which is pursued in the last chapter.

The **5th chapter**, **"The Pragmatics of On-line Concept Construction"**, is probably the richest in proposals, and the one in which most questions are raised. It deals with lexical semantics and with those processes of loosening and broadening of the encoded conceptual content which have been traditionally considered as not contributing to the proposition expressed. Carston doesn't support this view and shows that the processes of narrowing and broadening of the conceptual content are both reflected in the proposition expressed and, therefore, they are seen as contributing to the explicit level of communication.
In the relevance-theoretic framework, "atomic concepts" are considered nodes in memory which make available three kinds of information: the logical entry, (consisting of a set of inference rules which capture certain analytic implications of the concept), the encyclopaedic knowledge (including many different types of knowledge, from scientific to cultural specific knowledge and beliefs), and the lexical properties (specifying the phonetic, phonological and syntactic properties of the linguistic form encoding the concept). In the process of retrieving the intended meaning, there are not two distinct processes at work, one of narrowing and one of loosening, but only one process with two possible outcomes, deriving from the act of "picking and choosing from among the elements of logical and encyclopaedic information that are made available by the encoded concept" (p.334). The difference consists only in whether, in this process of on-line ad hoc concept construction, the logical properties are retained (like in the case of narrowing) or dropped (like in the case of loosening), but whatever the outcome is, it still represents a move away from strict literalness. The derivation of the intended meaning is seen as involving a mutual parallel adjustment of these processes until the addressee's expectation of relevance is met.
The analyses is applied to several kinds of figurative use, such as metaphor and hyperbole, as well as to the semantics of certain lexical items showing polisemy or vagueness, for which the idea is proposed that, like all lexical items, they encode only a very abstract and general concept providing a basis for pragmatic processes of enrichment or, pushing this idea even further, that they function as pointers to a conceptual area.
The very last paragraph of the chapter summarises the account of explicit communication supported and depicted in the book: a radical version of the underdeterminacy thesis is supported which allows

only for a three-level interpretive process, where the ostensive stimulus is decoded and the derived logical form is then enriched by pragmatically filling and adjusting "the semantic scaffolding provided by the linguistic expression" itself (p.366) , (explicature) and, possibly, through other totally pragmatically derived information (implicatures).

The book also contains two appendixes, "**Appendix 1: Relevance Theory Glossary**" and "**Appendix 2: Gricean Conversational Principles**", and more than 30 pages of **References** and **Indexes**.

"Thoughts and Utterances" is much more than the application of the Relevance Theory: it represents a huge step forward in the theory itself, strongly founded in pre-existing debates and analyses. The subtitle, "The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication", doesn't do it justice: the book is definitely about explicit communication as a whole, although the main goal of the author is to demonstrate the essential role of pragmatics in recovering utterance meaning.

What is immediately evident, from the very first pages, is the strongly cognitively oriented but interdisciplinary nature of the study: the author covers perspectives ranging from the philosophical to the logico-semantic and the neurological ones on such debated issues as the explicit/implicit and the semantics/pragmatics distinctions.

Carston provides an incredibly extensive survey of several traditions of research which, although from different and often irreconcilable perspectives, have contributed to the lively debate about these fundamental questions in linguistics. Her synthesis is carried out critically and in order to provide further evidence to the account of explicit communication that she proposes and to support the well delineated divisions that she makes. She doesn't dismiss all contributions coming from different areas of study (as is often the case), but tries to reinterpret some of the suggestions according to her framework of analysis and to include them in her account. This approach gives her work a philosophical taste, and, at the same time, it provides the research with steady foundations in order to build further within the relevance-theoretical framework.

In her attempt to provide a comprehensive panorama of the debate, the author also presents Relevance Theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) as well as the successive contributions added by Blakemore (1992), Infantidou (2001), Papafragou (2000) and others. This aspect, together with the critical analysis mentioned above and with an in-depth analysis of Grice's work and of the development of the Gricean theory by Levinson, makes "Thoughts and Utterances" also a useful, but not at all basic, handbook even for all those students and researchers who approach the processes guiding explicit communication for the first time. The book represents, indeed, a complete state of the art on a specific topic, although even a little background in linguistics and in philosophy of language is recommended, given the non-elementary nature of the book.

All the chapters are very rich in content: sometimes this richness makes the argumentation slightly difficult to follow, although everything is made clear in the end and all the different considerations find their exact place in the puzzle. The author was clearly aware of this argumentative complexity, since at the end of almost each chapter, and often even at the end of some paragraphs, she provides the reader with a brief summary of the points she made. These summarising lines are always extremely useful and help the reader follow the discussion.

As far as the readability is concerned, it must be signalled that the notes at the end of each chapters are as important and full of useful information and input as the main text: they are often used as a "box" for interesting material which would have led the discussion too far from the actual topic of the single paragraphs. The same holds for the two appendices at the end of the book. The first one provides the reader with Gricean Conversational Principles which are constantly mentioned in the book but never explicitly reported. The second appendix deals with the relevance-theoretic terminology. It provides an

essential dictionary containing all the keywords necessary to the understanding of the discussion, and the single lexical items are defined according to Carston's use of the term, especially when it doesn't perfectly correspond to some previous well-established usage.

Of course, the value of this book is not only in the critical state of the art that the author provides. Robyn Carston makes the Relevance theory progress providing researchers within this framework with new tools. She redesigns the model of explicit communication previously proposed according to her strong view of the Underderterminacy Thesis, ruling out the intermediate representational level of minimal proposition, which departs only minimally from encoded meaning but already has truth-conditions. In 'her linguistic' account (and she is very precise about this specification), there is only room for the logical form and for the enrichment it receives through different pragmatic inferential processes, driven from the linguistically encoded elements themselves (explicature) or totally pragmatically derived (implicature). The possibility for an other intermediate representational level to be useful is left open, in consideration of the fact that all philosophical accounts seem to include it. What changes, though, is the explicatory purpose. Linguistic pragmatics doesn't want to account for the truth conditions of propositions, and therefore it doesn't need that intermediate level.

Robyn Carston also attempts to make headway in lexical semantics. She tries to apply her theory also to word meaning, in an attempt to account for ambiguities, vagueness and polisemy. She hypothesises the online construction of ad hoc concepts (relative to a certain context), starting from a raw basis provided by a lexical item to the inferential processes. In order to support this explanation the author also provides a model for the meaning provided by concepts as summarized above. She leaves many questions open for further research, but the path she opens seems promising, since it seems applicable also to figurative uses of language.

Robyn Carston's book is not an isolated voice. It perfectly collocates in contemporary cognitive-linguistic research and shows numerous points of contact with other linguistic trends of study.

A similar view of communication is proposed in Bertuccelli Papi (2000), a study of implicitness in text and discourse. Implicitness and explicitness are considered gradable entities and the former is seen as a cover term for several phenomena (inexplicit, implicated and subplicit) related to different types of knowledge which the hearer can select in order to set up the context of interpretation. According to Bertuccelli Papi, the input is filtered and the most relevant information is selected by an evaluative mechanism. As I already mentioned, in Carston's book, the role of the hearer and of his "intention-reading" effort is widely recognised. However, contrarily to what happens in Bertuccelli Papi (2000), where a fundamental role is explicitly attributed to attitudes, here, the importance of attitudes in the communicative process (as a fundamental source for the identification of implicit meanings) is neglected. It is possible that attitudes are implicitly included in the "speaker's intentions", or that they are considered part of the situational context or of the background information.

Carston's proposals and hypothesis seem to be in line with the most recent development of lexical semantics and of the cognitive-functional language acquisition studies as well.

The online construction of ad hoc concepts from a steady core of meaning finds support in Croft and Cruse (to appear). In line with the recent development of Cognitive Psychology, they support the Dynamic Construal Approach, according to which there are no fixed concepts: concepts and structural relations between lexical items emerge in actual situations of use. They speak of "meaning construal", which seems to parallel Carston's on line concept construction. More point of contact could be outlined between these two approaches to the lexicon but this would lead us too far. I will only mention that also in Croft and Cruse, a very general steady element of meaning is hypothesised which receives a particular interpretation in a particular context according to several constraints.

Carston's communication process is essentially a mind-reading pragmatic process: the hearer has to imagine in a certain situation what the communicative intention of the speaker might be and to interpret the ostensive stimulus accordingly, trying to retrieve the most relevant information. The most recent

studies applying cognitive-functional approaches to language acquisition, this 'mind-reading perspective', or more precisely this 'intention reading', is considered as one of the essential features of the human mind involved in the development of language. Tomasello (2003) sees intention-reading as uniquely human and as one of the foundational processes for the emergence of language, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically.

"Thoughts and Utterances" is a very rich study, which marks a decisive step forward in the scientific study of explicit communication thanks to the solid linguistic, philosophical and scientific theoretical background witnessed by a very large bibliography of hundreds of titles. It is a work that shows links to the most recent trends in linguistics research and in cognitive studies in general, which is enough to make of Robyn Carston's book a necessary reading for all the people interested in the actual functioning of ostensive linguistic interaction.

References

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