

Reply to Carston

François Recanati

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Reply to Carston

Carston distinguishes three aspects in my pragmatics : (i) my radical contextualism (i.e., my rejection of minimalism), (ii) my account of primary pragmatic processes in terms of activation and association (rather than inference), and (iii) my claims about ‘availability’ as one of the contrasting features distinguishing secondary from primary pragmatic processes. She has no quarrel with (i), but questions both (ii) and (iii). Following her discussion, I will deal with these two aspects in turn.

Carston’s main objection to my account of primary pragmatic processes in terms of activation and association is that it makes them too dumb. A similar concern has been voiced by Sperber (p.c.) and Breheny (2002 : 178-80). There, allegedly, lies the superiority of the RT approach. For relevance theorists, utterance interpretation, whether at the primary or secondary level, is a smart, ‘all-things considered’ inferential process which pays due regard to speaker’s intentions and whichever factor may be relevant for getting the speaker right.

Carston provides the following counterexample to show that primary pragmatic processes are not dumb. Sarah says ‘Neil has broken his leg’ in a context in which (i) the addressee (John) knows two people called ‘Neil’, one of whom is his young son, Neil₁, the other a colleague in the department where John works, Neil₂, and (ii) John is currently worried about his son, so that his Neil₁ concept is more highly activated than his Neil₂ concept. Given the blind, mechanical nature of the primary process of reference assignment as I construe it, Carston says that Neil₁ ought to be the winning candidate, on my account. But if we add to the context the fact that (iii) John knows that Sarah does not know anything about John’s family life, while she does know that John has a colleague, Neil₂, who teaches her syntax, then the actual interpretation of the utterance will be quite different from that which (according to Carston) my account predicts: Neil₂ will be the winning candidate. As she points out, « this is explained quite straightforwardly within the RT approach, whose concept of optimal relevance includes as a crucial component of interpretation considerations of the speaker’s abilities (which includes her knowledge of the world) and preferences ».

To a large extent I have already addressed this sort of concern in previous work. Thus I made the following reply to Sperber’s analogous objection :

Sometimes the first interpretation that comes to mind (the most accessible one) turns out not to be satisfactory and forces the hearer to backtrack. According to Sperber, the possibility of such garden-path effects shows that success, for a candidate semantic value, cannot be equated with sheer accessibility. This objection is misguided, I think. The most accessible interpretation at some stage *s* in the interpretation process may well turn out to be unsatisfactory at some later stage *s'*, thereby resulting in a garden path effect and the need to backtrack. This does not show that interpretational success cannot be cashed out in terms of accessibility. At any given stage, the most accessible interpretation will be the winning one (at that stage). In garden path utterances we have *two* successive stages to consider. Some interpretation is the most accessible one, hence wins, at *s*, but that interpretation fails to fit some schema, hence loses, at a later stage *s'*. In an accessibility-based framework, this means that this interpretation's accessibility at *s'* is no longer sufficient for it to be the winning candidate (at *s'*). Another candidate (which was less accessible at *s*, but turns out to be more accessible at *s'*) takes over, hence the garden path effect. The distinction between successive stages of interpretation, together with the notion of an accessibility shift, is sufficient to account for garden path effects within the accessibility-based framework. (Recanati 1995 : 227 ; 2004 : 32)

This is exactly what happens in the ‘Neil’ example. As Carston herself puts it, Neil₁ is initially the most accessible candidate, so it is initially the winning candidate (at stage *s*). This means that the first interpretation that comes to the mind of the speaker (for whom Neil₁ is very salient) is mistaken and has to be corrected at stage *s*’ when the hearer realizes that the speaker cannot be referring to Neil₁. Here stage *s*’ corresponds to what we might call *the externalization of the explicature*, i.e. the step when the primary meaning is embedded within the meta-representational schema ‘The speaker says that...’ At that stage, an accessibility-shift occurs, for the following reason : Sarah (the speaker) is unconnected to Neil₁, while she’s got some connection to Neil₂. As a result of this, Neil₂ becomes the most accessible candidate at stage *s*’. That is so because, owing to the connection between them in the knowledge base of the interpreter, the concept of Sarah and the concept of Neil₂ mutually reinforce their activation, so that the winning interpretation at *s*’ (the externalization stage) is *Sarah tells me that Neil₂ has broken a leg*. This is very similar to the other sorts of accessibility-shift I have described in the works Carston refers to.

To be sure, there is something special about the accessibility-shift in this example, as opposed to e.g. the stolen wallet example (Recanati 1995 : 225-6, 2004 : 30-31). There are actually two differences, which go a long way towards explaining why Carston believes I should have trouble here. The first difference is that the accessibility-shift occurs when the explicature is externalized, that is, when the interpreter starts paying attention to the fact that the speaker is saying what she is saying. There is something meta-representational in this sort of case, as opposed to other cases (like the stolen wallet example, where the shift occurs before externalization). The second feature has to do with the role of schemata or scripts in examples like the stolen wallet example. Schemata or scripts are an instance of *general* world-knowledge as opposed to *particular* world-knowledge (such as John’s knowledge that Sarah does not know Neil₁ while she is acquainted with Neil₂).

As far as the second feature is concerned, let me say straightaway that I do not believe (and I never claimed) that *only* general world-knowledge can trigger the sort of accessibility shifts I talk about. Particular world-knowledge can play exactly the same role, and the crucial notion of associative ‘links’ between representations apply to representations at both levels. So, contrary to what Carston seems to assume, I do not have to start looking for relevant schemata or scripts before I can apply the notion of accessibility-shift to the Neil example.

Still, the Neil example involves meta-representing the speaker as saying something, and ruling out interpretations that conflict with what we know of the speaker and what she might or might not be saying. This sort of example, insofar as it involves meta-representational capacities on the part of the interpreter, seems to contradict my claim that

The interpretation which eventually emerges and incorporates the output of various pragmatic processes result from a blind, mechanical process, involving no reflection on the hearer’s part. The dynamics of accessibility does everything and no ‘inference’ is required. In particular, *there is no need to consider the speaker’s beliefs and intentions*. (Recanati 2004 : 32 ; my current emphasis)

Indeed, the last sentence (that I have italicized) goes too far. At some point the explicature is externalized, and the externalization process itself may contribute to shaping the explicature, as in the Neil example. This means that the interpretation process may involve some meta-representational component even at the primary level. It may, but it need not : that is presumably sufficient to ground the difference between the primary and the secondary level. (The secondary level is *essentially* meta-representational : to understand conversational implicatures, you have to be sensitive to the fact that the speaker is saying what she is saying.)

What I have said about the Neil example shows that my ‘dumb’ processes of activation and association may well mimick the smart, inferential processes posited by Relevance Theory. In view of that fact, it may be that the difference between the two frameworks reduces to a difference in the level of description. Indeed, whatever takes place in the brain has got to be dumb at an appropriately low level of description, however smart the behaviour that is thereby made possible.

If this is right – if the smartness of an inferential system can be implemented in a dumb associative system, as I claim – then what happens to the contrast I insist on between, on the one hand, secondary processes that are inferential and smart and take place at the ‘personal’ level, and primary processes that are sub-personal, associative and blind ? Am I not making a category mistake when I contrast these processes, since I clearly provide different levels of description for them ? That is how I understand Carston’s main line of criticism. As Sperber once put it (in conversation), ‘everything is subpersonal’ at the appropriate level of description. If, therefore, we focus on a single level of description (as we should if we are to understand mechanisms like mutual adjustment), it is unclear that there will remain any substantial contrast between the two types of process. Even secondary processes like the inferential derivation of conversational implicatures will turn out to be underpinned by dumb processes of the subpersonal variety.

In response, let me say first, that there *would* remain a substantial difference between the two types of process even if the personal/subpersonal distinction collapsed, namely the difference between processes that are global and (essentially) meta-representational, and processes that are neither. Second, I do not think the personal/subpersonal distinction collapses. Yes, in a certain sense, ‘everything is subpersonal’. Does this entail that there is no difference between subpersonal and personal processes ? No. Whatever their subpersonal underpinning personal processes are *consciously available*. That is a feature they have which ‘mere’ subpersonal processes don’t have. In all likelihood, there is something which, at the subpersonal level, is responsible for that feature, but whatever that is secondary pragmatic processes have that feature (I claim) while primary pragmatic processes don’t. This we can express, as in the following table, by saying that although primary and secondary pragmatic processes alike take place subpersonally, still secondary pragmatic processes are distinguished by their ‘personal’ quality — their conscious availability — to which nothing corresponds on the primary side.

	Primary pragmatic processes	secondary pragmatic processes
Personal	-	+
Subpersonal	+	+

But Carston objects to my notion that secondary pragmatic processes are consciously available, in contrast to primary pragmatic processes. She points out that the availability issue is quite complex : « there is a lot more to be said here than simply that secondary processes are (dispositionally) available to consciousness while primary ones are not... The current observations call for some finer-grained distinction within the realm of availability. » I agree : the issue *is* complex, and a series of rather subtle distinctions have to be made. I have made some of them, but more, and finer-grained, distinctions are undoubtedly needed. Among those I have made are the following :

- First, there is the distinction between occurrent and (various types of) dispositional availability. Note that for me, contrary to what Carston suggests, the inferential connection between the explicature and the implicature has to

be occurrently grasped, even though this may be done intuitively rather than by going through an explicit inference. In other words the interpreter must only be *capable* of making the inference (dispositional availability), but the fact *that* an inference is involved must be occurrently grasped.

- Second, there is the distinction between accidental and constitutive availability. Owing to that distinction, it's not true that a primary pragmatic process, on my account, is « predicted to not be available to consciousness » : a primary pragmatic process need not, but it may, be available to consciousness. Carston says that the constitutiveness claim is hard to test experimentally, and she may be right, but that is an issue I cannot go into here.
- Third, there is a distinction between two kinds of constitutive availability : that which derives from what I called the 'external duality' displayed by secondary pragmatic processes, and that which derives from the 'internal duality' displayed by some primary pragmatic processes, namely those which are responsible for 'above-threshold' (transparent) metaphors and metonymies (and, possibly, for certain scalar implicatures). That distinction has only been briefly sketched in *Literal Meaning* and much more needs to be said about it, and about 'transparency' more generally.

On the whole, I think I agree with Carston : to support my availability-based account of the primary/secondary distinction in the face of phenomena (such as 'accidental availability' or 'transparency') which blur the distinction, we need to elaborate ways of testing intuitions that are much finer-grained than anything currently available. The need for finer-grained ways of testing intuitions goes well beyond my availability-based account, however — Relevance Theory faces the same problem. The 'transparency' which characterizes certain primary pragmatic processes is such that in some cases, the speaker/hearer is aware that the meaning-ingredient which results from the process is extraneous to the semantic core of the utterance (even though that meaning-ingredient satisfies the Scope Principle). This awareness can be and has been used to argue that the pragmatic processes at issue do not really affect the utterance's intuitive truth-conditions, appearances notwithstanding (see e.g. Stanley 2005b : 230-31, 248-51, and Marti, forthcoming). In the same spirit, Stanley has argued that in many cases what Relevance Theorists construe as explicatures (because the relevant meaning-ingredients intuitively seem to affect the utterance's truth-conditions) ought to be construed by them as implicatures or at least as external to semantic content because the relevant meaning-ingredients do not satisfy the Scope Principle (Stanley 2005a : 368). Faced with such challenges, the contextualist approach (in whatever clothing) can only be sustained by drawing « finer-grained distinctions within the realm of availability ».

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