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## **1. Introduction**

In *Pragmatic Meaning and Cognition* Sophia Marmaridou presents a view of language use and cognitive and social aspects of pragmatic meaning as emerging from cognitive structures and conceptualisations built on the basis of the individuals' bodily and social experiences. Experiential realism (ER henceforth) is presented as a theoretical framework capable of tackling the nuances of meaning so conceived. Besides this general theoretical objective, Marmaridou tries to demonstrate that ER can also shed light on some of the puzzles posed or left unresolved by what she calls the societal and the cognitive approaches to pragmatics. In so doing, ER is alleged to have the beneficial side effect of providing the necessary bridge between these two approaches. Does it eventually manage to do so? The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that it does not. But before we deal with the bones of this criticism, let us review the different parts of the book in some detail.

## **2. The shortcomings and complementarity of cognitive and societal pragmatics**

In the first chapter, Marmaridou reviews the deficiencies of the cognitive and societal approaches to pragmatic meaning. The former includes a wide range of theoretical frameworks connected by their commitment to the idea that meaning is a mental phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> In the author's view while these approaches concentrate on the kind of computations or inferential operations that are carried out in utterance production and

<sup>1</sup> The array of theories includes Gricean pragmatics (cf. Grice (1975, 1978, 1981)), Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson (1995)), or Neo-Gricean pragmatics (cf. Horn (1988, 1989)).

interpretation, they ignore the essential role that the content of the assumptions processed and the socio-cultural constraints play in this process.<sup>2</sup> A second problem the cognitive perspective faces is the erroneous idealisation concerning speakers and hearers, who are assumed to share the same universal mental faculties and who are conceptually detached from any real social setting. A third problem concerns the concept of inference, a central issue in cognitive approaches to pragmatics. Marmaridou argues that the sociocultural aspects of the communicative event exert a crucial influence on the calculation of inferences.<sup>3</sup> In sum, the major weakness of cognitive pragmatics is, according to Marmaridou, that it considers cognitive and mental processing abilities as synonymous, while the latter are but one aspect of the former.<sup>4</sup>

The societal approach also presents a number of deficiencies that makes it inadequate to account for all aspects of language use. Current developments in societal pragmatics leave unanswered the important questions of how and why social constraints operate in communication. According to Marmaridou the two fundamental issues in societal pragmatics are the interactional (or "reflexive") character of communication and the concept of context of discourse. The concept of interaction relies heavily on a consideration of language as a "social institution" and communication as a "societal work" involving power relations among the individuals (cf. Labov (1972), Cameron (1990), Mey (1993)). Besides, being socially given, context is also interactively built in the course of the interaction (cf. Gumperz (1992), and Duranti and Goodwin (1992)). To make her criticism of societal pragmatics clear, we can follow Marmaridou and focus on Bang and Door's (1979) theory of utterance interpretation. These authors analyse utterance meaning as consisting of two parts: a situational and a contextual one. In Marmaridou's view, Bang and Door do not explain how the interpretation in the situational part is effected. That is, no cognitive mechanism is mentioned that can be held responsible for the internalisation, and thus the interpretation, of social meaning. However these cognitive mechanisms and processes are invoked when it comes to the analysis of how interpretations are carried out in the contextual part<sup>5</sup>. To sum up, societal pragmatics seems to Marmaridou to be unable to offer an account of the internalisation of sociocultural meaning that goes beyond a vague recognition of the role of cognition in language use.

The natural consequence of Marmaridou's revision of cognitive and societal pragmatics is that these two broad perspectives on pragmatic meaning are somehow complementary, the former leaving too much of society and culture out and the latter missing the cognitive point almost entirely. It is in this theoretical space that Marmaridou's work strives to carve up a place for experiential realism.

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2 This is, for example, the position held by Sperber and Wilson (1995) and their followers (e.g. Blakemore (1992)). According to relevance theorists, the fact that different individuals may interpret the same utterance in different ways is due to the different computations they perform when they process the utterance against a specific set of contextual assumptions.

3 This is the view defended by Wierzbicka (1991).

4 In this she follows Sweetser (1990).

5 The same criticism applies to other societal approaches like e.g. that of Mey (1993).

### 3. Experiential realism

The substance of ER is the embodiment-of-meaning hypothesis. This hypothesis has it that all forms of meaning are the result of the neural entrenchment of some bodily experience. As experiences can be physically or culturally constrained, it follows that both physical and cultural experiences will go into the formation of meaning. The idea has achieved relative success in the field of lexical semantics, where it originated through the work of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (cf. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), Lakoff (1987)).

The book is very explicit, at times to the point of excessive repetition, about the connectionist viewpoint on cognition. Everything meaningful must be the result of some stable, or at least occasional co-activation routine. Repeated co-activation leads to neural entrenchment. As usual, whatever cannot be examined under the microscope will only be considered as a possible hypothesis. The route followed by Marmaridou is to apply it to pragmatic phenomena with a double objective: to solve problems left unresolved by other approaches, and to lend further support to the embodiment-of-meaning hypothesis.

The remaining four chapters follow the same programme: a central pragmatic problem is taken up, the inadequacies of societal and cognitive pragmatic accounts are pointed out, and an approach in experientialist terms is rehearsed which supposedly solves the problems and lends support to the theory. Specifically, Marmaridou addresses four pragmatic phenomena which have received considerable attention in the literature: deixis, presupposition, speech acts and implicature. Experiential realism provides her with the adequate tools to propose a particular cognitive structure in each case, in terms of which particular sociocultural understanding arise whenever these phenomena appear in language use. The point of departure of Marmaridou's analysis is the internal conceptualisation of the four phenomena in terms of idealised cognitive models (ICMs)

In the case of deixis the ICM is one of 'pointing out'. According to Marmaridou, the link between person and social deixis on the one hand, and space, time and discourse deixis on the other is represented by means of a number of metaphors, explained by the *spatialization-of-form-hypothesis* (cf. Lakoff 1987), and requiring a metaphorical mapping from a physical space onto a conceptual space. In the case of presuppositions, the ICM is built in terms of the expressions that trigger them. In order to explain why certain uses of those triggers serve to create or cancel off presuppositions, Marmaridou argues that parts of the ICM are cognitively backgrounded, while others are foregrounded. In the case of speech acts, the ICM is socioculturally determined and presents a dual nature which reflects utterances as a mode of speaking and as a mode of action, both domains being linked, via metaphorical mappings, through the concept of force. According to Marmaridou, force can be established in two ways: by conventional means or, in their absence, in terms of interaction goals, negotiated within a set of sociocultural norms depending on the social roles of the interlocutors. The proposed ICMs account both for the structuring of a mental space and the prototypical structure of the phenomena. At the same time, the internal structure of the categories is analysed in terms of prototype theory, and the relationship among more specific categories in terms of a network of conceptual metaphors.

Observed in detail, the outcome of the process is not as positive as initially foreseen. There are two main weaknesses in the argumentation that Marmaridou puts forward against

current cognitive and societal perspectives and in favour of ER. On the one hand, the alleged theoretical benefits of the proposed approach lie more in the conceptual than in the empirical domain, where the contribution of the proposed framework is relatively poor. The conceptual argumentation deployed does little more than promote the proposed analysis to the range of a merely plausible conceptual alternative to existing cognitive pragmatic theories. This will hence be called the methodological issue. On the other hand, Marmaridou's analysis disregards a number of important empirical issues that have long been part of the debate in cognitive pragmatics without introducing new ones. This casts doubt on the theoretical elaboration that is put forward. We call this the empirical issue. To make our criticism concrete and clear, we will concentrate on two of the pragmatic phenomena that Marmaridou addresses, presuppositions and implicatures.

#### 4. The methodological issue

In her treatment of presupposition, Marmaridou focuses on the thorny issue of metalinguistic negation. Basically, she agrees with the standard position that what gets negated in metalinguistic negation is something presupposed rather than asserted by the speaker's utterance. There is a long list of empirical issues regarding this difficult problem. First of all there is the important problem of the existence of one or two negations. Some authors (cf. Martin (1982), Burton-Roberts (1987)) defend that negation is ambiguous between an internal, presupposition-preserving reading and an external, presupposition-cancelling reading. Some other authors (cf. Atlas (1981), Kempson (1986), Carston (1996, 1998)) favour the view that there is but one negation that can be applied to different parts or meaning layers of an utterance. Second, there is the question of the grammatical, semantic or pragmatic nature of metalinguistic negation. Metalinguistic negation does not have an overt grammatical reflex in natural languages over the world (i.e. is not expressible by affixed negation, does not trigger negative polarity, etc), is not reconcilable with a clear-cut distinction between true and false propositions, and is more directly related to the concept of assertability than to the concept of truth (cf. Horn (1985, 1989)). These and other problems constitute the empirical arena on which much of the theoretical debate has taken place ever since Bertrand Russell pointed out the apparent ambiguity of sentences like *the king of France is not bald*. Interestingly, Marmaridou's account touches on these issues only as part of a review of the cognitive pragmatic view. Her own contribution to the topic quickly switches to the highly conceptual field of the mental schemas triggering and constraining the appearance of presuppositions. It is in such a field, we are informed, that a principled connection between the social dimension of communication and its cognitive basis can be fruitfully pursued.

The basic premise is that metalinguistic negation, and presupposition-cancelling generally, is the result of an ICM that conceptualises power relations at a high level of abstraction. The participant who cancels (or else brings focus on) a presupposition is, in so doing, displaying and making recognisable a power position in the verbal interchange. More simply, by cancelling or highlighting presuppositions, the speaker takes full control of the cognitive background against which communication takes place.

The question arises of what trivial connection there can be between the alleged social import of the phenomena at issue and the empirical problems listed above. Marmaridou's

account of presupposition does not improve in this respect. However the point we want to make in this section is slightly different. Seen in a broad, methodological perspective, Marmaridou's application of ER to presuppositions (or to other pragmatic phenomena for that matter) is objectionable on purely theoretical or methodological grounds: it sets us in an empirical realm, and shows us the (supposed) theoretical weaknesses of a number of theories which are hence alleged to be in need of revision; however, as soon as it comes to the alternatives, all we are offered is a conceptual elaboration that does not directly relate to, or at least is not homogeneous with, the range and quality of the empirical problems raised; and neither does the proposed theory reveal new problems regarding the chosen phenomena.

The upshot of this revision of the overall methodology of the book is that it can hardly qualify as a proper alternative to the theories it sets out to improve, simply because it is not on a par with them on purely methodological grounds.

##### 5. The empirical issue

The consequence of putting the conceptual cart before the empirical horse is that a number of attested facts appear obscured, if not overtly questioned or negated, for no justified reason. Obviously, there is nothing objectionable about casting doubt on matters that have long been taken for granted. This is a healthy and widespread practice in science. The problem comes when the revision is undertaken on purely conceptual grounds. This is, we believe, the case of Marmaridou's criticism of some of the most important distinctions of cognitive pragmatics. One such case is the distinction between conventional and pragmatic meaning. Accepting, as Marmaridou does, that the entrenchment of a neural co-activation in a connectionist network is the sole source of meaning, the distinctions between different types of meaning become blurred. In the cognitive paradigm conventional meaning is more or less automatically retrieved, while pragmatic meaning and contextual information are the result of a reason-guided inferential process. To show the differences more clearly, we will take up Marmaridou's account of implicatures and compare it with a standard cognitive account.

Chapter 6 offers a study case of the application of ER to implicatures, what follows is Marmaridou's example and discussion (Marmaridou 2000: 267).

(1) A parent-daughter conversation:

D1: Did I tell you? Finally we'll be going to the disco this Saturday.  
P1: I didn't get that.  
D2: Don't you remember that we had agreed to go to a disco once?  
P2: Who's 'we'?  
D3: The girls and me.  
P3: Ah!  
D4: Don't tell me you're not letting me go!

Marmaridou's account of the recovery of the implicated assumption in this dialogue relies on two points: (a) the situation in which it takes place activates a certain cognitive scenario:

Significantly, the last utterance of the above dialogue reveals an implicit interactive scenario typical of the wider sociocultural framework in which it originates, namely that permission must be typically sought and granted before an adolescent's evening outing. It is in terms of the assessment of the situation as instantiating this institutionally grounded scenario that conflicting goals are being set and power relations are challenged in this case. (Marmaridou (2000: 267))

(b) an inferential process which relies heavily on the cognitive scenarios made accessible by the lexical items used in the interchange:

In the above dialogue, the inferences that appear to have been drawn by the father upon hearing D2, as his utterance in P2 merely indicated, relate to the permission seeking scenario, itself involving consent and agreement. Associated conceptual framings of experience are lexicalised as 'agreeing', while agents are lexicalised by pronouns such as 'we', 'you', 'who', conflict by 'not', etc. For example, a possible inference that the father derives from D2 is that his daughter wants to present the future outing as an already agreed upon event by all partied concerned and hence that his consent is not being sought now. This inference at least partly arises from the experiential scenes activated by the lexical frame 'agreed' and the agent pronominalization 'we': 'agree' lexicalizes a conceptualisation of experience whereby there is an issue of interest to two or more parties; the parties potentially hold different views or have different interests with respect to this issue; the issue of interest may relate to future action; the issue of interest is negotiable, etc. The pronoun 'we' typically lexicalises reference to the current speaker and some other party including or excluding the addressee. (Marmaridou (2000: 268-269))

What would be the standard cognitive account of the recovery of the implicature *you are not really allowed to go out*? Simply to posit an inferential process at some point in the interchange. Suppose that in the example at issue this point corresponds to the father's exclamation in P3 (as the girl's annoyed reply seems to suggest). (2) depicts a plausible inferential chain leading from P3 to the intended message,

(2)

- A1: The father finds relevant the information about who exactly is denoted by "we".
- A2: The father points out the relevance of the people involved in the agreement including him.
- A3: He is not part of the agreement that has been made on this occasion.
- A4: The agreement is not valid as it stands.
- A5: The daughter is not really allowed to go to the disco.

This is one possible inferential routine of the type typically advocated by cognitive pragmatists (with differences among them pertaining to the reason why they are triggered<sup>6</sup>). In Marmaridou's proposed model the information that permission must be typically sought and granted before an adolescent's evening outing gets conventionally activated. But then the question is: why? Is it simply because the conversation is between a father and his daughter?

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6 In Relevance Theory, for example, (the principle of) relevance accounts for any inferences entertained during the communicative process.

Is it because of the father's question about "we"? Is it because of the father's exclamation? At least in the last two cases, it is hard to see how the relevant information can get into the communicative process unless it is part of an inferential process like the one sketched above. If the former option is chosen, we are forced to admit that a number of such scenarios, which are in principle indefinite, are activated every time communication is established (which is a rather implausible hypothesis). In order to examine to what extent Marmaridou's cognitive frameworks are as part of the inferential process as the premises that license them and the consequences that they yield, let us introduce a refinement of her own example: a mature daughter talks to an old father and his pal, makes the "who are "we"?" question to her father, and directs the final interjection to both her father and his friend. In such a context, the expression could have plausibly been directed to the father's friend to make accessible to him the contextual assumption/ cognitive framework that in that house permission from the daughter must be typically sought and granted before the father's evening outing. The point is not only that this information can hardly be cognitively accessible to the puzzled old man due to some neurally entrenched sociocultural background, but, most importantly, that it becomes cognitively accessible to him (in the context at hand, for the first time in his life) as a result of his trying to make sense of the daughter's expression, which turns out to bear a somewhat prohibiting attitude towards the outing.

In relation to point (b) above, Marmaridou's listing of the cognitive scenarios activated by the lexical items contained in the different utterances in (1) is not very different (or can be easily assimilated) to the set of assumptions making up the cognitive-like inferential routine described above. The differences come from diverging conceptual choices and hence ultimately depend on theoretical tastes.

The conclusion is that, as cognitive pragmatics holds, and contrary to her account, Marmaridou's proposed cognitive scenarios or ICMs are part of the inferential processes which are characteristic of ostensive communication rather than automatically activated pieces of meaning. However, conceptually committed as it is to the idea that there is but one meaning, and that it shows up through the same process (neural co-activation), Marmaridou's analysis has little margin to tackle these simple facts, no matter how well attested they are from an empirical point of view.

## 6. Conclusions

On the basis of the above review, it can be stated that the general objective of Marmaridou's endeavour (i.e. the bridging between societal and cognitive pragmatics), promising and attractive as it may appear at first sight, is far from being effectively achieved through the displayed analysis. The main criticism that can be made to the proposed theory is that it relies heavily on conceptual arguments which are at present far from being empirically testable. This inevitably leads it to (a) contributing little to the important points of a by now longstanding empirical debate, and (b) neglected some empirically supported notions and distinctions.

This outcome casts doubt on Marmaridou's critical review of societal and cognitive pragmatics, and discards ER as a suitable candidate to provide a bridge between them, let alone to replace either of them. It could be said that societal and cognitive pragmatics, the two main lines of pragmatic research to date, have not been so mistaken in claiming that their objects of study and their goals are too distant for there being even the prospect of a unification.

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