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NOTES AND DISCUSSION

Phatic communication and Relevance Theory: a reply to Žegarac & Clark

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1. Introduction

Recent work in Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) illustrates the coming of age of modern pragmatic scholarship in creating an environment in which a particular theory of pragmatics can be taken for granted, without explanation or justification, and an analysis of a phenomenon previously unaccounted for within that theory can be advanced. One is reminded of much of the recent syntactic work within GB/Principles & Parameters/Minimalist Theory: the dominance of the Chomskyan approach – particularly in certain geographic regions – allows researchers, for better or worse, to simply assume the correctness of the theory in their work and proceed to illustrate how that theory might (or must) be extended or modified to accommodate a new class of data. In this volume, Žegarac & Clark (1999) provide the latest illustration of a similar strategy in pragmatics: the correctness of RT is assumed and an analysis of 'phatic communication' proposed within that framework. On the one hand, this constitutes an advance for pragmatic theory, since until recently there was no comprehensive all-inclusive framework within which certain pragmatic generalizations could be stated. If nothing else, RT has served to raise a number of important issues surrounding the semantics-pragmatics interface, helping to crystallize the debate and make explicit many assumptions that had been either implicit or non-existent in other frameworks. In particular, RT work on scalar implicature/explicature and on echoic mention and metalinguistic negation (e.g. Carston 1988, 1995; Récanati 1989) has represented major advances in our understanding of these phenomena and their theoretical implications. Thus, whatever one may think of RT, it is a theory that must be taken seriously by anyone working in this area. On the other hand, we find that RT suffers from one of the principal afflictions of the aforementioned work in the GB/P&P/Minimalism mainstream: a remarkable failure to address, come to terms with, and

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incorporate the extensive previous literature on the topic under current consideration.

Žegarac & Clark (henceforth Ž&C) set out to provide an RT-based account of phatic communication, where PHATIC COMMUNICATION (a development of Malinowski's earlier notion of 'phatic communion') is characterizable, following Crystal (1991: 257), as 'language used for establishing an atmosphere or maintaining social contact rather than for exchanging information or ideas'. Opting for a much broader notion, Ž&C argue that phatic communication is a type of 'covert communication', specifically, communication characterized by phatic implications, i.e. conclusions that do not depend on the explicit content of an utterance (p. 331). Thus, for instance, every time a speaker utters anything, her utterance will ostensively communicate the assumption that she is alive. By Ž&C's definition, this assumption must be phatic, and they readily admit as much (p. 333). But if this is so, then RTers have simply abandoned trying to account for the traditional notion of phaticness as that which concerns the social relationship between speaker and hearer; their term subsumes phatic information (and much else) without accounting for either our intuitions about phaticness or any significant amount of linguistic data.

Indeed, even traditionally-defined phatic communication (à la Malinowski) represents such a vast and disparate range of data that it would be extraordinary to find that it could be reduced to a corollary of RT. In what follows, we argue that phatic communication cannot be so reduced and, furthermore, that there exist a number of grave methodological problems with the framework that would cast any such attempt into serious doubt.

2. Major points

2.1 *The omniscient view*

Ž&C (like other practitioners of RT) take an idealized and omniscient view of discourse. Unfortunately, few speakers are omniscient in the relevant way. Thus, an assumption is manifest 'if the environment provides sufficient evidence for its adoption' (p. 324). But from whose point of view? RT assumes an omniscient entity that is capable of determining whether the environment provides 'sufficient evidence'. What if I am momentarily internally distracted (unbeknownst to anyone else)? Then it doesn't matter that the 'environment' is providing sufficient evidence; it may not be sufficient for ME. What 'manifest' really seems to mean is "We think most people would get this most of the time". But it is not the environment per se that determines this, and it is not obvious how such an omniscient view of context can be dispensed with or straightforwardly modified without undermining the basis of the framework.

Similarly, one cannot speak of something being 'mutually manifest' to two individuals. Who or what decides what is and isn't manifest to each of the

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individuals in question? Nor is the RT notion 'shared cognitive environment' of much practical use in accounting for linguistic behavior, for unless I BELIEVE something is shared, the fact that it IS shared is not available to me. All we have, of course, are beliefs about one another's shared cognitive environment. As far as we can tell, 'mutually manifest' is simply another term for what others call 'presumed shared knowledge' without providing additional insight into the phenomenon.

In the same vein consider Ž&C's claim (p. 324) that '[...] an assumption may be manifest without being entertained'. Again, it can only be from a particular individual's point of view that an assumption is manifest. As an example of a non-entertained yet manifest assumption, the authors offer the fact that somebody's speaking would provide evidence that she is alive. But wouldn't this be an actual entailment, rather than an assumption? More relevantly, if such 'assumptions' need not be represented, then how do they constitute part of the hearer's knowledge?

This failure on the part of Ž&C to relativize beliefs to particular speakers and hearers – to sort out who knows or believes what at each point in the discourse – results in some epistemological confusion. For example, consider the three ways in which they claim a hearer can draw an inference not explicitly sanctioned by a speaker's intentions (p. 341): covertly (when the hearer does not attribute a communicative intention to the speaker, but both the intention to inform and the intention to conceal this intention are so attributed); accidentally (when the hearer attributes neither a communicative nor an informative intention to the speaker), and inadvertently (when the speaker lacks the intention to communicate an assumption, but the hearer is nevertheless justified in assuming that the speaker intended to communicate it). The first two categories clearly lie within the hearer's belief space, representing the hearer's assumptions about the speaker's beliefs and intentions. The third category, however, presents a state of affairs from an omniscient perspective; it simply describes a situation in which the hearer, unbeknownst to himself, holds a mistaken belief. (For if the hearer ever knew an assumption were 'inadvertent', it would immediately cease being so.) Such a belief state could exist only in God's discourse model, a model to which we are routinely denied access.

One final term of implicit omniscience is the RT notion of 'successful communication'. According to RT, this consummation is effected when the communicated set of assumptions is made mutually manifest to the communicator and audience. But how do we know when this has occurred? Mutual manifestness is, again, an inherently omniscient notion; the question of successful communication must be posed in terms of "From whose point of view?" Such appeals to omnisciently defined epistemic principles fly in the face of a vast (and uncited) literature on mutual knowledge and beliefs. Here, we have in mind the work of Herb Clark, Barbara Grosz, Aravind Joshi, Jerry Morgan, Candy Sidner, Bonnie Webber, among many others; cf. e.g.

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Webber (1979), Clark & Marshall (1981), Grosz & Sidner (1986) and the papers in Smith (1982) for a conspectus.

2.2 *The role of conventionalization*

The second major problem with Ž&C's RT-based account is the failure to adequately address the relationship between phaticness and conventionalization. Ž&C see phatic communication as 'in principle, independent of standardisation and conventionalisation' (p. 329). This is far from obvious. Part of what makes a message a 'social convention' is the fact that it is a fixed way of conveying a particular (phatic) message. This point was made with particular eloquence in Morgan's classic 1978 paper that distinguishes between CONVENTIONS OF LANGUAGE and CONVENTIONS OF USAGE.

Ž&C argue (p. 329) that their account is designed to capture the intuition that 'the main point of some utterances depends on the fact that the speaker has said something to the hearer more than on exactly what has been said'. In these instances, it is the fact that an OSTENSIVE STIMULUS has been used (and not the utterance's literal meaning, or, in RT terms, its 'linguistic encoding') that renders the utterance phatic and that 'many other utterances' would have had the same effect. This is true, but not just ANY ostensive stimulus will do. In the context of having just met someone, if I don't use one of a very restricted set of greetings, I may well generate undesirable implicatures. That is precisely why formulaic utterances are formulaic – they are precompiled utterances that fulfill various social obligations by allowing the speaker to produce an unmarked utterance in the discharging of a social obligation or the performance of some social function (see again Morgan 1978 on the notion of short-circuiting, and earlier work by Bach 1975 on standardized non-literality). While the use of a non-formulaic utterance may well increase processing costs and generate implicatures, this does not deny the existence and special status of formulaic or ritualized utterances. On the contrary, it is precisely because a speaker chose NOT to use a formulaic utterance that the hearer is licensed to draw such inferences.

Ultimately, however, Ž&C finally do acknowledge the role of linguistic convention, albeit not exactly in those terms: '[T]he contextual knowledge about the way in which a verbal expression is TYPICALLY used affects the interpretation process by constraining the hearer's assumptions about the way in which that expression is intended to be relevant. […] And the more often the utterance of a particular linguistic string is used to give rise to a particular interpretation, the stronger the connection between the linguistic string and the interpretation will be' (pp. 336–337, emphasis ours). This strikes us as linguistic conventionalization pure and simple, yet Ž&C explicitly disavow the role of conventions in determining phatic interpretations. Similarly, they acknowledge that 'general knowledge about the way [an] expression […] is usually used will be highly accessible'. This seems

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to be just another way of saying speakers know which linguistic forms they use are conventional and which are not.

Ž&C do provide two constructed examples where, they argue, the context is such that 'the fact that the speaker has spoken is far more relevant than what is actually said' (p. 334). One is the case in which the speaker is presumed dead, and therefore any utterance whatsoever will lead the hearer to infer that speaker is alive. This is unproblematic, but obviously represents a very special case. The other case, where S and H are partners and haven't spoken to each other for three days after a big row, is quite different. Here, we believe it very much matters what the speaker says and that it is not the 'mere fact of speaking' that is relevant, although of course this will depend on the context. And that's the problem: we cannot supply an effective counterexample, since in principle there ARE no counterexamples. If we offered an example where what is said would clearly seem to matter, such as 'I want to break up!' or 'You can go to hell!', Ž&C could respond with: 'Well, in that context the relevance of the linguistically-derived content overrides the phatic content'. But for this response to be convincing, we require a characterization of those aspects of linguistically-derived content that 'override' the act of ostension itself. The general vagueness of the analysis precludes the falsification of Ž&C's claims: if the context is such that what is said doesn't matter, then the utterance is more phatic; if the context is such that what is said does matter, then the utterance is less phatic. But what is it about a given context, specifically, that would lead to one interpretation over the other? All we get are anecdotal observations (and constructed anecdotes, at that).

In fact, it appears that Ž&C have smuggled conventionalization in through the processing door. Their 'ease of processing effort' corresponds rather suspiciously to 'degree of conventionalization', the very notion they earlier rejected out of hand as irrelevant, although it has with good reason figured prominently, under a variety of labels and incarnations, at the heart of classical (neo-)Gricean pragmatics (cf. Grice 1967, 1989; Searle 1975; Morgan 1978; Bach & Harnish 1979; Levinson 1983). Undoubtedly what determines 'ease of processing' will depend, in part, on how CONVENTIONALIZED the utterance/response is, and that means that the form itself IS relevant in the processing of phatic utterances.

2.3 (*Rabid non-empirical*) *Methodology*

2.3.1 *Reliance on intuitions and default contexts*

Within their purportedly 'cognitive' account of communication, Ž&C employ a distinctly non-empirical methodology. None of their claims about language processing, preferred interpretations or communicative intentions is based on any psychological model or theory. Instead, they rely almost exclusively upon their own intuitions – risky business indeed given how

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notoriously unreliable intuitions can be, especially at the level of discourse where context plays such a crucial role in determining acceptability. Presumably the correct theory of pragmatics will not be determined by reflecting about how people process and interpret language (even if, counterfactually, there were complete agreement); it will require investigating what people actually do, in both naturalistic and experimental settings. (Ž&C do make use of a corpus of naturally-occurring language; however it consists of exactly two tokens – and these are both drawn from fictional screenplays.)

To illustrate the problem of Ž&C's heavy reliance upon their intuitions, consider their concession (p. 335) that phaticness is a matter of degree, i.e. that utterances may be 'relatively phatic', 'relatively unphatic', or 'both phatic and non-phatic'. But on what basis? Like most researchers in RT, Ž&C seem to be relying exclusively on their intuitions for what counts as 'phatic'; some additional evidence or at least some kind of heuristic would be useful. To take a single example that could easily be multiplied, Ž&C assert (p. 335) that *How are you?* is 'more likely to lead to a phatic interpretation' than *How are you today?*, which, in turn, is claimed to be more phatic than *How are you these days?* But what is the basis for this (statistically based) claim? If anything, it strikes us that some of these contributions, depending on the context, may have a phatic AS WELL AS, rather than INSTEAD OF, an information-seeking function.

One more instance of non-empirical methodology is worth citing. In connection with the uncontroversial observation that 'information about social relationships' is relevant to the form and interpretation of phatic utterances, Ž&C (following Laver 1974) inform us that 'speakers may only comment on, or inquire about, attributes of the hearer if they are social "equals" or "superiors"' (p. 340). This particular observation is very far from uncontroversial; in fact, it is entirely unsupported – and quite likely unsupportable – by either data or intuition. (The context, if not the syntax, of the quote makes it clear that the socially non-inferior *they* are the speakers, not the hearer(s).) If this were true, it would certainly cut down on those obsequious questions and comments from one's underlings (e.g. an intern asking a chief executive whether he could use a new tie), but it is hard to imagine how such a claim could be established. If anything, it might be argued that it is generally social 'inferiors' who are especially licensed or expected to inquire (or care) about attributes of their interlocutors.

2.3.2 *Circularity and vacuity*

Another characteristic of RT analyses is the hedging of virtually every substantive claim, often to the point of near-vacuity. Consider the following passages, chosen virtually at random from throughout the paper (emphasis ours): 'But, in this context neither the phatic nor the non-phatic interpretation is LIKELY to be very salient' (p. 332); '[C]ontextual knowledge

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about the way in which a verbal expression is TYPICALLY used affects the interpretation process..'. (p. 336); '[T]he question *How are you?* is USUALLY not used to show the speaker's genuine interest in the hearer's welfare …'. (p. 337); 'Given this, the hearer MAY take (20) to indicate, among other things, that the speaker does not consider herself inferior to him while making or not making any of the following assumptions: […]' (p. 340); 'In contrast, (22) MIGHT convey assumptions which damage social relationships and which the speaker did not intend to convey' (p. 342); 'The customer MAY tacitly accept the covertly communicated assumptions precisely because they are made more manifest to him without attracting his attention' (p. 342); and, finally, 'Such covert communication MAY BUT NEED NOT involve the exploitation of linguistic meaning' (p. 343).

When the claims aren't hedged, they verge on the circular, e.g. 'Phatic communication is communication which gives rise to, or is intended to give rise to, phatic interpretations' (p. 346). And what is a 'phatic interpretation'? 'An interpretation is phatic to the extent that it contains phatic implicatures'. And a 'phatic implicature' is a kind of 'phatic implication'. And so on. What one will search for in vain is any kind of substantive falsifiable claim or prediction. The typical analysis of a discourse runs as follows: if we assume X, then interpretation Y is likely, but not necessary. As is characteristic of much work in the paradigm, Ž&C provide only a handful of examples (mostly constructed) and provide only ad hoc accounts of them that are consistent with their intuitions. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to other work in pragmatic theory that relies heavily on naturally-occurring data (e.g. Brown & Yule 1983, Levinson 1987, Fox 1987, Schiffrin 1987, Hirschberg 1991, Clark 1992, Prince 1992, Horn 1992, Chafe 1994, Birner 1996, Birner & Ward 1998).

More serious is the tendency in RT to say what amounts to 'Such-and-such expression is relevant (or echoic, phatic, etc.) in this context, unless it isn't'. Consider Ž&C's characterization of what drives a hearer to go beyond the literal meaning of an utterance in search of its relevance: 'Relevance theory predicts that [the hearer's going beyond linguistically-derived meanings of the utterance] should happen only if linguistically-derived meanings manifestly fail to yield enough effects for the criterion of consistency with the Principle of Relevance to be satisfied' (p. 334). In other words, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. In the absence of some empirical evidence, it is difficult to evaluate, much less falsify, such a claim.

2.3.3 *Vagueness*

Much work in RT is characterized by vague, unanalyzed or poorly defined notions; Ž&C's study of phatic communication is no exception. Among the terms upon which their analysis relies are 'linguistic complexity' and 'ease of processing'; such psychological notions are wielded in the absence of any

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empirical support. We are instead offered only Ž&C's intuitions regarding complexity and sentence processing, intuitions that we often do not share. For example, Ž&C claim that the less effortful the interpretation of the linguistic expression is, the more suitable that expression will be for phatic communication (p. 335). Consider the following two responses to A's query:

A: How are you?
B1: Terrible.
B2: I'm actually doing pretty good.

Which of B's responses is to be considered more 'effortful'? B1 consists of one word, one morpheme and three syllables, while B2 consists of five words, eight morphemes and nine or ten syllables. But the less effortful response, B1, is also on our intuitions the less phatic.

The effortfulness of processing, of course, is not inherent in a linguistic expression; it will vary with the context. Consider the difference between *What's been filling up your days lately?* vs. *I am speaking English*. We can easily imagine a context where the latter requires minimal processing (certainly less than the former), yet the former is clearly the more phatic.

Another area left vague is the gradient nature of phaticness itself. The authors concede that phaticness is a 'more or less' phenomenon. But when do we get more and when do we get less? We are never given any heuristics to guide us. But Ž&C do employ a clever decoy to forestall potential accusations of vagueness: they simply claim (p. 346) that their account is 'precise': 'Relevance Theory makes relatively precise predictions about when hearers or addressees will derive phatic implicatures and interpretations.' Relevance Theory does many things, but alas this cannot be numbered among them.

In sum, until RTers can provide some means other than their intuitions by which linguistic complexity and processing cost can be measured, their analyses rest solely upon terra non firma.

2.4 *Parochialism*

As we mentioned above, one unwelcome parallel between work in Relevance theory and work within hegemonic theories of syntax is in the practice of citation – or lack thereof. We observe that seven of the eleven works cited in Ž&C are RT-internal, this despite the enormous body of work in this area within other frameworks. Specifically, Ž&C leave entirely unaddressed the question of how their (idiosyncratically and inconsistently defined) notion of phatic communication differs from other types of non-propositional, or 'non-descriptive', meaning. Throughout the century, a wide range of terms have been proposed to cover this type of meaning (e.g. 'emotive', 'attitudinal', 'interpersonal', 'expressive', 'social'); however, their relation to phatic communication is left as an exercise for the reader. Although Ž&C

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do cite the work of Malinowski, Jakobson, and Laver, they do not mention the equally important and relevant theoretical frameworks of Argyle, Bühler, Firth, and Halliday.

More specifically, Ž&C's particular treatment of phatic communication falls within a broad field of inquiry that has been called interactional sociolinguistics or the ethnography of communication. There is a vast literature on the maintenance of 'face', the expression of social relations through language, and conversational interaction. Prominently figuring here is the work of e.g. Penny Brown, Erving Goffman, John Gumperz, Gail Jefferson, Steve Levinson, Harvey Sacks, Manny Schegloff, Deborah Schiffrin and Deborah Tannen; see Schiffrin (1994) for an extensive survey of various relevant approaches.

Although Ž&C concede that there is a 'considerable literature which [....] looks at social aspects of verbal communication' (p. 328), with a single reference to the Schiffrin work, they justify their virtual failure to cite any of it by claiming that the COGNITIVE aspects of such phenomena 'have not been studied in much detail' (ibid.). However, by simply adopting a 'cognitive' framework to cast their views on phatic communication (and it is not at all made clear how previous accounts are NOT cognitive), they seem to believe that they are exempt from citing, much less taking into account, previous scholarship and data.

Ideally, we would have been provided with a comparison of frameworks, showing precisely how an RT-based account differs from, and is preferable to, previous ones in accounting with elegance and predictive power for this aspect of linguistic behavior. But, as with its hegemonic syntactic counterparts, previous work in the same domain is summarily dismissed or ignored.

While phatic communication is an important area of linguistic (and non-linguistic) interaction, showing how a couple of examples CAN be accounted for within a particular framework does not in itself represent an intellectual advance. More useful would be some kind of taxonomy of the various sub-types of phatic communication; clearly certain topics are more readily available for phatic interpretations than others. What are they and why is this so? That is, what is the (culturally-based) source for phatic communication?

Finally, while Ž&C boast that their definition of phatic interpretation makes no reference to social relationships (p. 339), they acknowledge – somewhat perplexingly – that 'most phatic interpretations achieve relevance by suggesting something about the nature of the social relationship between the speaker and the hearer' (p. 340). Yet we are given no clue as to which social relationships are involved or how phatic communication affects them. Until these issues are addressed, the utility of Relevance theory, or indeed any other framework, in describing and explaining the phenomenon remains in doubt.

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