

Forum

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On weak communication

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Abstract: Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson suggest that much of linguistic communication is weak because the hearer usually must take a great responsibility in the interpretation of the speaker's utterance. Sometimes, the (very) "weak implicatures" supplied by the hearer are very different from (and even incompatible with) the speaker's intention. Relevance Theory helps us to understand crucial aspects of weak communication. However, I aim at showing that pragmatic theory should reconsider the importance of intention in order to explain that, often, the hearer interprets certain meanings that are independent from (or even incompatible with) the speaker's intention. Some types of inferences proposed by Mira Ariel, as well as unintended puns studied by Sydney Lamb and other stratificational linguists, help us to begin to show that it may be necessary to go beyond the concept of intention if we want to understand why and how human communication is weak.

Keywords: communication, cognition, weak implicatures, truth compatible inferences, relational networks

The greater the range of alternatives, the *WEAKER* the implicatures, and the more responsibility the hearer has to take for the particular choices he makes. Much of human communication is weak in this sense, a fact that a pragmatic theory should explain rather than idealise away.

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (2005: 370)

1 An example as introduction

One day, George W. Bush was talking about "the enemies of the USA" and, at a certain moment, he produced the following utterance:

(1) They never stop thinking of new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.

Utterance (1), which can be considered as an instance of Freudian slip, enables us to ask the following two questions:

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- (a) Did Mr. Bush mean that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people? In other words, did he have the intention to make mutually manifest that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people?
- (b) Did the audience understand that, by saying *neither do we*, Mr. Bush expressed that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people?

We shall return to these questions after considering canonical analyses developed in pragmatic theory. (One of the fragments of that speech can be found in the Internet, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy05zj0X23M>).

2 Communication as transmission and recognition of mutually manifest intentions: From Grice to relevance theory

Cognitive-Philosophical pragmatics (a.k.a. Anglo-American pragmatics or Gricean pragmatics) aims at accounting for human communication and language understanding. One of its main assumptions is that pragmatics, the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances, must be distinguished from semantics, the study of core linguistic meaning.

Of course, many linguistic phenomena can be directly considered as cases of human communication and language understanding: A person says or writes something, and another person can understand what the communicator said or wrote. Thus, Cognitive-Philosophical pragmatics is an empirical discipline. However, it has a philosophical origin, and this is what explains part of the name of this linguistic mainstream. The theory of speech acts created by John L. Austin and, particularly, Paul Grice's theory of meaning led to the development of the field (Recanati 2004a, 2004b).

Cognitive-Philosophical pragmatics is one of the most important mainstreams in the study of communication and cognition. This deservedly respected tradition has provided many and valuable accounts of verbal interaction and utterance comprehension. Some of the fundamental ideas proposed by Grice (1957, 1967, 1968, 1981, 1982, 1989), are the cornerstone of this mainstream. For example, the speaker's meaning is conceived as a mutually manifest intention: It is fulfilled when being recognized by the hearer.

Different trends in Cognitive-Philosophical Pragmatics agree that, in recognizing the speaker's meaning, the hearer is guided by the expectation that verbal contributions are consistent with rational communicative norms. The Cooperative Principle (Grice 2002), constitutive rules in the terms of Searle (1969), the principles of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1995), are concrete examples of this fundamental hypothesis.

It should be emphasized that this tradition assumes that there is a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics, i.e., between meanings within the linguistic system and meanings in use (Asher and Lascarides 2003; Blutner and Zeevat 2003, Horn and Ward 2004, Kadmon 2001; Stalnaker 1999). According to the canonical analysis developed by Grice, every meaning which is communicated explicitly or implicitly is a fully determinate assumption for which the speaker is just as much responsible as if she had asserted it directly. In other words, all communicated meanings have not only been individually intended by the speaker, but also individually identified by the hearer. We may consider the following example (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 194):

- (2) (a) Peter: Would you drive a Mercedes?
(b) Mary: I wouldn't drive ANY expensive car.

In the well-known terms of Grice, Mary has ostensibly flouted, and exploited, the second maxim of quantity, according to which someone's contribution must not be more informative than required (Grice 1967: 722). Mary's utterance can be reconciled with the supposition that she is observing the overall Cooperative Principle. By saying (2b), it is evident that she ostensibly flouts the second maxim of quantity: This means that Mary is cooperative and gives rise to a conversational implicature. The hearer recognizes that Mary said (2b) but implied (3).

- (3) Mary wouldn't drive a Mercedes.

When a conversational implicature is generated in this way, it is said that a maxim is being exploited: Implication (3) is an instance of a "particularized conversational implicature" (Horn 2004; Carston 2004; Bach 2006). Grice's perspective of communication and cognition is inferential, and it constitutes the point of departure of Relevance Theory, where it is assumed that communication is an inferential-ostensive process based on the transmission and recognition of intentions. It has been widely accepted that it is to Grice that Relevance Theory owes its model of communication.

Within this context, Sperber and Wilson consider that the propositional form of (2b) does not directly answer the question in (2a), but it gives the hearer

“immediate access to his encyclopedic information” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 194) about expensive cars, which may include an assumption like (4).

(4) A Mercedes is an expensive car.

When processed in a cognitive context including assumption (4), (2b) yields (3), which (in Relevance Theory framework) is *not* conceived here as a “particularized conversational implicature,” but just as a “contextual implication.”

Utterance (2b) has not explicitly answered Peter’s question, but it has made manifest a contextually implied answer. An implicature is a contextual implication which a speaker, when intending her utterance to be manifestly relevant, manifestly intended to make manifest to the hearer.

Sperber and Wilson distinguish two types of implicatures: Implication (4) is an implicated premise of (2b). On the other hand, implication (3) is an implicated conclusion, which has been obtained on the basis of assumptions (2b) and (4).

This analysis may help us to show that Relevance-theoretic pragmatics has gone beyond the pioneering work of Grice. For example, it claims that both implicit and explicit communication are inferential, and it maintains that the explicit side of meaning is also worthy of pragmatic attention. In other words, not only implicatures but also explicatures are the result of inferential tasks in linguistic comprehension.

The role of relevance in cognition and communication is accounted for by the two following general principles:

- *Cognitive principle of relevance*: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.
- *Communicative principle of relevance*: Every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

The presumption of optimal relevance does not only establish that the utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing, but it also specifies that *it is the most relevant utterance which is compatible with the communicator’s intentions*. Therefore, relevance-guided comprehension heuristic is determined by communicator’s intention: The hearer will have to follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance; he will have to resolve ambiguities and referential indeterminacies, to go beyond linguistic meaning, to supply contextual assumptions, to compute explicatures and implicatures. Finally, the hearer will stop this process when he satisfies his expectations of relevance, *which are based on the communicator’s intention*.

It follows from the (communicative) principle of relevance that an indirect answer like (2b) allows the speaker to expect the hearer to achieve some

additional contextual effects not obtainable from a direct answer like *I wouldn't drive a Mercedes*, which would offset the additional effort needed to process (2b), supply premise (4), and deduce (3) as an implicated conclusion.

Utterance (2b) gives Peter access to his encyclopedic knowledge about expensive cars. Peter can retrieve the names of other expensive cars, and derive the conclusion that Mary would not drive them. If it is a prototypical item of general information that an Alfa Romeo and a Ferrari are expensive cars, then it is reasonable for Peter to add implicated premises (5) and (6) to his cognitive environment, derive conclusions (7) and (8), and check the subsequent contextual effects:

- (5) An Alfa Romeo is an expensive car.
- (6) A Ferrari is an expensive car.
- (7) Mary wouldn't drive an Alfa Romeo.
- (8) Mary wouldn't drive a Ferrari.

But Peter could not only derive (7) and (8) as implicated conclusions, but also construct some premises such as (9), which is plausible enough in Peter's and Mary's mutual cognitive environment. On the basis of (9), Peter could obtain the implicated conclusion (10).

- (9) People who refuse to drive expensive cars disapprove of displays of wealth.
- (10) Mary disapproves of displays of wealth.

The indirect answer (2b) [*I wouldn't drive ANY expensive car*] thus opens up a number of possibilities of interpretation which are not available for its direct counterpart *I wouldn't drive a Mercedes*. "Given the [communicative] principle of relevance, Mary must have expected some of these possibilities to be fruitful enough to offset the extra processing costs incurred" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 197).

Implicatures (7), (8), and (10) could not be accounted for in orthodox Gricean terms: Mary does not need to have specifically intended Peter to supply premises (5), (6) and (9), and derive conclusions (7), (8) and (10). Since different subsets of implicated premises and conclusions can be used by Peter to establish the optimal relevance of the intended interpretation, none of them need to have been specifically intended by Mary: Her mutually manifest intention is just to make manifest some assumptions; she does not make any of these assumptions more than "weakly manifest."

By producing utterance (2b), Mary provides conclusive evidence that she regards a Mercedes as an expensive car [implicated premise (4)] and would refuse to drive in one [implicated conclusion (3)]. On the other hand, Mary provides rather less than conclusive evidence that she would refuse to drive in a Ferrari [implicated conclusion (8)]. However, it would be odd to say that

Mary's utterance (2b) has not encouraged Peter to think that Mary would also refuse to drive in a Ferrari and an Alfa Romeo.

Sperber and Wilson consider that, although (7), (8) and (10) cannot be regarded as fully intended inferences, it would be wrong to regard them as entirely unintended, as derived on Peter's exclusive responsibility: Since Mary was justified in communicating her presumption of relevance, she expected some of these implicatures to be derived. In other words, Mary made those implicatures weakly manifest. Thus implications (7), (8), and (10) are examples of weak implicatures.

Strong implicatures are the implicated premises and conclusions that the hearer is strongly encouraged (but not forced) to supply, for example (4) and (3). When this encouragement is weaker, the range of possibilities among which the hearer can choose is wider, and, consequently, the implicatures are weaker, for example (7), (8) and (10). It is apparent that the hearer will have less confidence that the weak implicatures he obtains will represent faithfully the speaker's thoughts. Here we are in front of indeterminacy: Different people may entertain different beliefs on the basis of the same cognitive environment. Communication does not aim at duplicating thoughts, but at increasing the mutuality of cognitive environments.

Now we can suppose that Peter believes (11) and finds relevant to derive (12) as a contextual implication from (11) together with (2b):

- (11) People who would not drive an expensive car would not play golf either.
 (12) Mary would not play golf.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 199), "it is very doubtful" that Mary has encouraged Peter to supply the premise in (11) and derive the conclusion in (12). There is no a sharp distinction between assumptions strongly supported by the speaker, and assumptions derived from the utterance but on the hearer's exclusive responsibility. The illusion that there is a clear-cut distinction between wholly determinate, specifically intended inferences and indeterminate, wholly unintended inferences cannot be maintained within Relevance Theory. Sperber and Wilson suggest that their theory offers a way of getting rid of this illusion without sacrificing clarity of conceptual framework.

Now, what can we say about example (1)? Did Mr. Bush implicate very weakly that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people? We will return, again, to this question after considering some theoretical consequences dealing with the treatment of unintended meanings in pragmatics.

3 What happens with unintended meanings? From “Grice’s exclusion” to theoretical problems with “weak communication”

Sperber and Wilson admit that (12) [*Mary would not play golf*] is a contextual implication: (12) is a (very) weak implicature of (2b) [*I wouldn’t drive ANY expensive car*], even if Mary (the speaker) did not have the intention to communicate it.

This conception is different from the explanation provided by orthodox Gricean pragmatics, according to which communication consists in the process of transmitting and recognizing individually intended meanings. In the terms that have been used by Marcelo Dascal (1999: 32), an example like (12) falls into “Grice’s exclusion:” It is not an object of study for pragmatics, and it should be treated by semiotics or some branch of psychology.

If we follow the road taken by Gricean authors (Atlas 2005; Dascal 1999; Horn 2004, 2005, 2007; Levinson 2000, 2006a, 2006b), we must simply discard implications like (12) and utterances like (1), and recommend semioticians or psychoanalysts to treat them.

If we accept that the hearer can be (almost absolutely) responsible for the choices he makes, and that, as a consequence, *there are* very weak implicatures, then we have to test some hypotheses proposed by Sperber and Wilson. It could be suggested here that it is not necessary at all to determine whether a very weak implicature is “completely” unintended or not: Perhaps the more the hearer’s responsibility, the weaker the implicature.

Now, the following argument aims at summarizing the explanation provided by Relevance Theory, which welcomes the study of not individually intended meanings.

- i. Peter asked (2a): *Would you drive a Mercedes?*
- ii. Mary answered (2b): *I wouldn’t drive ANY expensive car*
- iii. Peter supplies the strong implicature (3): *Mary wouldn’t drive a Mercedes.*
- iv. Peter supplies the (relatively) weak implicature (8): *Mary wouldn’t drive a Ferrari.*
- v. Peter supplies the weak implicature (10): *Mary disapproves of displays of wealth.*
- vi. Weak implicatures like (8) and (10) are not completely unintended, i.e., they do not depend on Peter’s sole responsibility.
- vii. But, on the basis of the implicated premise (11) [*People who would not drive an expensive car would not play golf either*], Peter also supplies the very weak “implicature” (12): *Mary would not play golf.*

- viii. The very weak “implicature” (12) depends mainly (or maybe exclusively) on Peter’s sole interpretation. (In other words, Mary could say that she did not mean that she would not play golf, or she could make explicit that (12) has simply been created by Peter’s thick imagination).
- ix. According to the communicative principle of relevance, the speaker’s utterance will be optimally relevant for the hearer, if the hearer identifies the speaker’s communicative intention.
- x. However, the very weak “implicature” (12) has not been derived from the speaker’s communicative intention, precisely because (12) depends on Peter’s sole interpretation.
- xi. If the derivation of (12) has not been guided by the speaker’s communicative intention, then (12) does not depend on the communicative principle of relevance. (The reason for that is that an assumption will be optimally relevant for a hearer if he identifies the speaker’s communicative intention).

Therefore:

- xii. If the communicative principle of relevance governs utterance comprehension, then there cannot be very weak implicatures like (12) (simply because the construction of such very weak implicatures is not guided by the recognition of the speaker’s communicative intention).
- xiii. But if *there are* very weak implicatures like (12) (whose derivation is *not* guided by the recognition of the speaker’s communicative intention), then the communicative principle of relevance cannot govern *all* types of utterance comprehension.

In other words, some very weak meanings, like those expressed by (12), are the result of the hearer’s interpretation, independently from the speaker’s intention. Thus we cannot account for the interpretation of such meanings in the terms of the communicative principle of relevance, because the communicative principle of relevance states that the hearer must identify the speaker’s communicative intention in order to find the speaker’s utterance relevant.

Nevertheless, we may confirm the following phenomenon: In order to understand such meanings the hearer does not need to identify the speaker’s intention (although the intentional meaning may have some connection with those “unintended” meanings).

In the next section I will try to analyze the weak meanings that are evoked in the Freudian slip that was reproduced at the beginning of the article, in example (1). Hopefully, this analysis will enable us to understand that we need to go beyond the concept of intention if we want to fully understand that many instances of human communication are weak.

4 A Freudian slip as an instance of weak communication

What can we say now about example (1)? First of all, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Mr. Bush had the intention to make mutually manifest (13):

(13) We never stop thinking of new ways to protect our country and our people.

On the other hand, it is also reasonable to think that many of those who were hearing his speech derived (14), (15) and/or (16):

(14) Mr. Bush is not thinking of ways to protect the USA and American people.

(15) Mr. Bush is thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people.

(16) Mr. Bush does not care about American people.

Consequently, it is the case that:

- i. Mr. Bush had the intention to inform and communicate (13).
- ii. Mr. Bush did *not* have the intention to inform or communicate (14)–(16).
- iii. Many hearers derived (14), (15) and/or (16) on the basis of utterance (1).
- iv. Implications (14)–(16) depend mainly (and maybe exclusively) on hearers' interpretation.
- v. Implications (14)–(16) are not only independent from, but also incompatible with (13).

And, finally, it is also the case that:

- vi. Some hearers interpreted meanings, like those expressed by (14)–(16), that are not only independent from, but also incompatible with the speaker's intention.

We could also say that (13) is some kind of implication. It is a very interesting case, because it makes manifest the presumable intentional meaning, although this intentional meaning has not been made explicit in (or by?) the utterance. Our cognitive systems are so complex that they can identify (or attribute) even the intentional meaning that has not been made mutually manifest.

On the other hand, are (14)–(16) good candidates to be considered as very weak implicatures? If they are accepted as such, we may confirm that some weak implicatures are *against* the presumable intentional meaning.

Previous remarks also aim at answering questions (a) and (b), which were asked in the brief introduction of this article (Section 1):

- (a) Question: Did Mr. Bush mean that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people? In other words, did he have the intention to make mutually manifest that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people?

Answer: No. Mr. Bush did not mean that he was thinking about harming America. In other words, he did not have the intention to make mutually manifest that he was thinking of new ways to harm his own country and his own people.

- (b) Question: Did the audience understand that, by saying neither do we, Mr. Bush expressed that he was thinking of new ways to harm the USA and American people?

Answer: Yes. The audience did understand that, by saying that, Mr. Bush expressed that he was thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people (inference (15)).

Thus, we could suggest that pragmatic theory should also take into account “marginal” instances of verbal behavior, like Freudian slips, conceptual errors and unintended puns (Dell 1979, Dell and Reich 1977, 1980a, 1980b; Reich 1985). Some examples of unintentional puns provided by Reich (1985) are listed below. The last one is from a newspaper and all the others were produced by people in Reich’s presence, under circumstances that led him to believe that the puns were produced without intention.

(17) I didn’t enjoy the girl scouts. They were always badgering you.

(18) I think the writing was on the wall when the subways started getting all the graffiti.

(19) You can get a good deal on shoes. You just have to be on your toes.

(20) The fast food industry has been eating into the profits of the large grocery chains.

(21) “I would have to ask the question, ‘Would [Rev. Jesse] Jackson have been over there [in Syria on a mission to attempt to obtain the release of a downed flier] if Lieutenant Goodman weren’t a black?’ Sometimes you have to call a spade a spade.” [Associated Press report appearing in the *Globe and Mail*, January 4, 1984]

According to Lamb (1999), the choice of the words which promotes the pun can be explained as involving semantic, lexical and phonological relationships. Although of course nobody can’t be sure what happened, it is likely that the choice of the verb *badger* was influenced by its phonological resemblance to the otherwise unrelated noun *badge*, which would have been receiving some activation because of the conceptual connections between girl scouts and merit badges (Lamb 1999: 192). The study of Freudian slips and unintentional puns would allow pragmatic theory to show that “weak communication” also involve those peculiar meanings which are incompatible with the speaker’s intention (and would fall into Grice’s exclusion).

It is also interesting that intentional and unintentional meaning co-exist: Hearers can perfectly interpret the two of them. In example (1), it is necessary to identify (or reconstruct, or imagine) some intentional meaning, like (13), in order to recognize the unintended meanings expressed in (14)–(16).

It seems that the intentional meaning is still the point of departure of utterance comprehension. However, it also seems that we need to go beyond the intentional meaning if we think the weaker aspects of verbal interaction should also be understood and explained.

5 Conclusions

On the basis of previous analyses we may arrive at the following conclusions, which will be developed in the four subsections corresponding to these conclusions.

1. Several linguistic phenomena are instances of weak communication.
2. Unintentional meanings are a promising challenge for pragmatic theory.
3. Pragmatic theory still needs to distinguish different types of both intended and unintended inferred meanings.
4. The “intentional fallacy” should be recognized, and abandoned

5.1 Several linguistic phenomena are instances of weak communication

The utterances which evoke some kind of unintended meanings do have sense. They are not uncommon phenomena in language use, and thus they should not be discarded by the science of language.

It is the case that there are weak implicatures whose recovery depends mainly (or exclusively) on the hearer’s interpretation, for example implication (12) [*Mary would not play golf*], which was derived on the basis of utterance (2b) [*I would not drive ANY expensive car*] and other implicated premises and conclusions. Consequently, very weak implicatures are part of everyday conversation.

It is also the case that there are several cases of unintended transmission of information, such as unintended puns and Freudian slips. These linguistic phenomena involve non-intended meanings, which are evoked in an utterance but have not been individually intended by the speaker. Consequently, such linguistic phenomena also promote very weak implications. Freudian slips and unintentional puns also deserve to be considered part of weak communication and, because of that, pragmatic theory should also explain them.

If the meanings identified by the hearer are independent from the speaker's intention, they have not been derived on the basis of the (communicative) principle of relevance. Therefore, the (communicative) principle of relevance does not explain many fundamental cases that "a pragmatic theory should explain rather of idealize away" (Sperber and Wilson 2005: 370).

There is also a terminological problem that anyway may cause some confusion. The expression "weak implicature" can be inconvenient in the cases where some meaning evoked in the utterance is interpreted by the hearer but has not been intended by the speaker. In other words, we are saying that something can be implicated without intention. Although we are in front of implicit meaning, it may seem that the term "very weak implicature" suggests that the speaker implicated something without having intended it.

As a first solution, we may adopt a wide conception of implicatures: something can be implicated by an utterance, independently from the speaker's intention.

As an alternative solution, we could find a new label for those meanings that (although having been evoked by the speaker's utterance and having been interpreted by the hearer) are independent from or even incompatible with the speaker's intention. "Unintentional meanings" could be a good label in order to solve this mere terminological question.

5.2 Unintentional meanings are a promising challenge for pragmatic theory

Peter's (very weak) interpretation represented in implication (12), Freudian slips like (1), and unintentional puns like (17)–(21), are just some examples of the various kinds of anomalous data which actually reveal very important information about the structure of the cognitive system which underlies our linguistic abilities.

Orthodox Gricean linguists could argue that unintended transmission of information is not communication at all. However, such an argumentative maneuver would be rather deceitful, because pragmatics intends to account for language use. According to Grice's exclusion, unintended contributions to conversation are regarded as irrelevant or inconvenient phenomena. But any theory (or any hypothesis) can be rescued from falsification if we decide to ignore enough certain phenomena. On the contrary, following Sperber and Wilson proposal, we may admit that much of linguistic communication is weak, and that a pragmatic theory should explain weak communication.

Of course, this promising scientific challenge does not imply that intentional meaning lacks importance. In fact, it has already been said that intentional and

unintentional meanings coexist in linguistic comprehension, and that intentional meaning is an indispensable point of reference in utterance comprehension.

For example, unintentional meanings pose difficulties to Relevance theory, and especially the way they are presented in Wilson and Sperber (2002), who mention such inferences in order to justify ignoring them, as they are “derivational bare branches which yield no further non-trivial implications” (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 598). Thus, unintentional meanings may be of interest only if they manage to influence and divert the course of discourse. Otherwise, these are no more than unimportant implications, which are justifiably discarded by the hearer.

5.3 Different types of unintended inferred meanings should be distinguished

As has already been mentioned, unintended inferred meanings are usually ignored or little dealt with whenever discursive inferences are discussed. Nevertheless, Mira Ariel has proposed to distinguish (in addition to explicatures and different kinds of implicatures) another category of pragmatic inferences: “truth compatible inferences, interpretations which are in principle compatible with what the speaker says, but which are not intended by her” (Ariel 2010: 272). Such inferences had been first named “uncooperative inferences:” According to Ariel (2004: 672), uncooperative inferences are like particularized conversational implicatures because that they are only plausible and therefore cancelable. However, there is a crucial difference between them. Unlike conversational implicatures, uncooperative inferences have not been intended by the speaker, not even as weak implicatures. More recently, Ariel has selected the expression “truth-compatible inferences” (2008: 86–87, 2010: 272) for those type of pragmatic inferences.

The example of Mr. Bush’s statement, in utterance (1) and inferences (13)–(16) seems to manifest a slightly different behavior, which actually corresponds with Ariel’s (2002a, 2002b, 2008) “wise-guy interpretations:” “Interlocutors who revert to ‘wise-guy interpretations’ may fail to infer (...) layers of pragmatic meanings and derive a contextually inappropriate/unintended interpretation” (Ariel 2008: 302).

Sometimes interlocutors consciously ignore the speaker’s intended inferences, hence the name “wise-guy,” and this is the case here. All hearers of Bush’s statement who inferred (14)–(16), consciously chose to do so, while being perfectly aware to Bush’s real intended meaning, as well as to his syntactic mistake which led to the unintended inference.

The case of unintentional puns seems to be more complicated. For a pun to be a pun, both meanings of the word or phrase in question should co-exist. Otherwise, the humorous effect will not be achieved (cfr. Raskin 1985; Giora 2003). In fact, it is the comparison between the two options which ultimately yields the hearer's enjoyment. In this sense, puns are similar to the previous Bush example, as there, too, deriving the unintended meaning is made for one purpose only: For achieving the humorous effect.

The implication in (12) is a good instance of "unintentional meaning," whereas the other examples, like (14)–(16) and unintentional puns (17)–(21) seem different in nature. Consequently, they should not be considered as unintentional meanings per se.

Certainly, more attested examples of the use of unintentional meanings in natural discourse will be needed in order to recognize their importance. Moreover, it will be crucial that these examples show the impact these meanings may have on discourse, namely, the way these meanings may interfere with a conversation and influence its course.

For the moment, Ariel's distinctions (2010) may help us to understand the nine examples of inferences that have been given here:

- Example (3) [*Mary wouldn't drive a Mercedes*] is an instance of a conventional and (very) strong implicature. (It can be also interpreted as a particularized conversational implicature in the terms of Grice).
- Examples (7) [*Mary wouldn't drive an Alfa Romeo*] and (8) [*Mary wouldn't drive a Ferrari*] are instances of weak implicatures in the terms of Sperber and Wilson. Example (10) [*Mary disapproves of displays of wealth*] is an instance of a (very) weak implicature.
- Example (12) [*Mary would not play golf*] can be considered as a case of unintentional inferred meanings. It is a truth-compatible inference (or uncooperative inference) in the terms of Ariel.
- Example (13) [*We never stop thinking of new ways to protect our country and our people*] is the reconstruction of the presumable intentional meaning.
- Examples (14)–(16) [*Mr. Bush is not thinking of ways to protect the USA and American people, Mr. Bush is thinking of ways to harm the USA and American people, Mr. Bush does not care about American people*] are "wise-guy interpretations" in the terms of Ariel. The recognition of Bush's real intended meaning in (13) is absolutely consistent with such "clever" interpretations.

Dealing with unintended puns, the choice of the related expressions is what promotes the humorous effect. Such choice involves certain linguistic relationships. Of course, we cannot be sure what happened, but in the case of example (19) [*I think the writing was on the wall when the subways started getting all the*

graffiti], it could be suggested that the choice of the expression *the writing was on the wall* was influenced by *graffiti*, and its connection with the meaning of wall, which in its turn is connected with the expression *graffiti* (whose meaning is precisely a certain type of writing on a wall). There are also here negative connotations dealing with the existence of graffiti in the subway: Because of such connotations the speaker probably chose the expression *the writing was on the wall*.

Figure 1 is a simple relational network that depicts the connections between meanings (IN CAPITAL LETTERS) and “words” (*in italic letters*) within the linguistic system of the hearer who recognizes the pun.

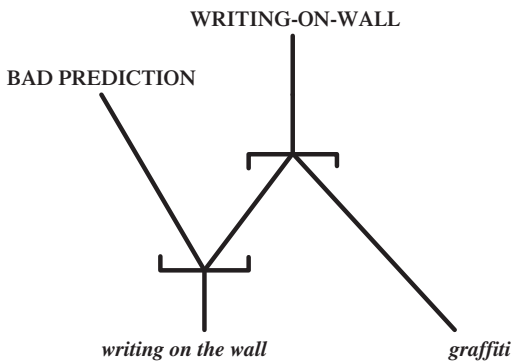


Figure 1: The unintended pun based on the appearance of two related expressions.

The brackets represent specific nodes in relational networks (Lamb 1999, 2004, 2005, 2013). Activation from *writing on the wall* goes to the meanings BAD PREDICTION *and* GRAFFITI. Correspondingly, activation from the “literal” meaning WRITING-ON-WALL goes to *writing on wall* *and* *graffiti*. The various and complex inferences involved in the recognition of the pun have been roughly represented in Figure 1. On the basis of explanations provided with relational networks we could also ask whether the real process of linguistic comprehension needs to make use of full propositions like those we usually express in order to account for concrete inferences (both explicit and implicit, both intentional and unintentional).

In conclusion: Independently from the provisional taxonomy inspired on Ariel’s work, and also independently from the plausibility of Lamb’s relational networks, it is the case that utterances evoke many different types of meanings corresponding to “weak communication.” It is also the case that pragmatic theory should deal with such meanings.

5.4 The “intentional fallacy” should be recognized, and abandoned

In 1946, the literary critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley attacked the “intentional fallacy:” They showed that we do not need to know what an author intended in order to interpret the text that had been written by this author. The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for text comprehension. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, the text belongs to the public and what is said about a text “is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology” (1946: 5).

I dare to suggest that we could borrow the label “intentional fallacy” from literary theory in order to talk, in philosophy of language and linguistics, about the complex phenomenon that I have tried to expose in this article. Thanks to Austin, some time ago, philosophers realized that there was a “Descriptive Fallacy:” To understand the meaning of a sentence was not simply to understand its truth condition. Because of this wrong belief, philosophers had overlooked many other kinds of utterances and meanings. After the labor developed by Austin, Grice and many other important authors, philosophers and linguists turned to pay attention to non-descriptive utterances and several aspects of meaning which go beyond truth value.

Currently, we realize that the study of language use may crash into another serious obstacle: We could call it the “Intentional Fallacy.” If linguistics was concerned mainly with intentional transmission of information, it would discard crucial cases of verbal behavior revealing fundamental information about linguistic comprehension.

Orthodox Gricean pragmatics has overlapped intention and communication. On the other hand, without abandoning the fruitful Cognitive-Philosophical mainstream, Relevance Theory aims at accounting for the weaker aspects of communication. Those anomalous meanings evoked by Freudian slips and unintended puns, for example, could also be studied as instances of weak communication.

The *cognitive* principle of relevance, according to which human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance, does not impose any constraint related to intentional meaning. Unintentional meanings dealing with weak communication can be easily treated in the terms of this principle, because it establishes that human beings are constantly interpreting the external world, even the products of the linguistic behavior of other persons. If the intentional fallacy is recognized and abandoned, instances of weak communication will be explained rather than idealized away.

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Bionote

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