I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU MEANT:
I HEARD WHAT YOU SAID

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1. INTRODUCTION

MUCH of the work done on interpersonal communication in the last twenty years, whether under the heading of Discourse Analysis (for example, Coulthard 1985) or within the area of post-Gricean pragmatic treatment of cooperation in any of its aspects, (for instance, Sperber and Wilson 1986), proceeds on the assumption that there is a sincere Hearer (or Reader) who genuinely tries to interpret what an equally sincere Speaker (or Writer) means when he or she says (or writes) something in a specific context. Some authorities in the field (such as Tannen 1981) seem to assume that this approach to an understanding of how communication functions corresponds fairly closely to what actually happens in real life, whereas others (perhaps Grice 1975) simply use the assumption as a hypothesis, basis or norm on, or

around, which to construct a theory to explain both genuine, innocent, cooperation and its opposite.

The present paper sets out to discuss one way in which Hearers, when it suits their purposes, take advantage of what Speakers say and deliberately ignore what they mean, in order to gain some personal advantage. It aims to provide an additional sidelight on indirect speech acts as carriers or intensifiers of pragmatic ambiguity, showing how misunderstandings may sometimes be exactly what Hearers want to achieve. It relates also to what Carmen Olivares (1991: 151), having mentioned half lies and half truths, describes as a "disturbing effect" caused by verbalism, which pays too much attention to "form" at the expense of "content," since if Hearers respond to the form and seek a content —semantic or pragmatic— that will best accord with their own aims, such misunderstandings are bound to occur.

2. PRAGMATIC AMBIGUITY

Grice's Cooperative Principle (see Grice 1975) is so well known that there is no need to reiterate it here. The aspect of its application which is directly relevant to this paper is that it provides an explanation of how a cooperative Hearer manages to understand what the Speaker means —in the sense of wanting to achieve— even when this is not directly related to what he says. The four maxims into which Grice divides his Cooperative Principle provide a framework within which indirect speech acts (like the use of a request for information on the literal level —"Can you pass the salt?"— which is easily and immediately understood as a request for action —passing the salt) are explained as not causing a communicative problem in ordinary, sincere, conversation. Yet, of course, indirect speech acts never totally lose their literal, or direct, meaning or force. Thus the question "Can you pass me the salt?" may realistically be treated as a literal request for information about the Hearer's salt-passing ability in a particular situation, evoking a straightforward answer like "Yes" or "Sure," at the same time as it functions as a request for action, stimulating both the act of passing the salt and a commentary on the act like "Here it is" or "There you are." "Sure, there you are," then, acknowledges both the direct and the indirect meaning of the utterance "Can you pass the salt?"

Grice made at least three provisions for non-cooperative conversation; by this I mean that he does not claim that talk exchanges are always sincere and innocent. Firstly, he gives rather full treatment (1975: 49-50) to various ways in which a participant in an exchange may fail to fulfil the Cooperative Principle, simply by violating it, by opting out of it, by flouting one of its maxims or by choosing to respect one maxim which clashes with another. Secondly, he mentions quarrelling (1975: 48) as a type of exchange in which a Speaker may fail to be cooperative. Thirdly, he explains that "any one who cares about the goals that are central to conversation . . . must be expected to have an interest … in participating in talk exchanges that will be profitable . . ." (1975: 49), thus implying that others may not care about the goals of the conversation itself or may not have an interest in talk exchanges that will be "profitable," in the sense of mutually profitable.

From this brief outline of the Cooperative Principle it is clear that Grice envisaged situations in which a Speaker might not be interested in cooperating with the Hearer and might take deliberate steps to be uncooperative. What I want to suggest here is that the Hearer is just as likely as the Speaker not to cooperate and that he too has means of violating the Cooperative Principle at his disposal.

Other authorities have treated a different type of pragmatic ambiguity, which can be seen as analogical with semantic or lexical ambiguity, in the sense that an utterance spoken by one person to another in a given situation may be capable of being interpreted as performing more than one single, univocal, act. In a particularly clear exposition of the pragmatic ambiguity, Haldur Õim (1977: 251-268) shows how a sentence like "The man is cutting a tree" (the non-standard English is irrelevant to the point being made) "which has one definite syntactic form and designates one definite objective fact . . . can be analyzed as a message in several different ways. What this means is that (the sentence) is pragmatically ambiguous . . . it cannot be given one definite pragmatic description" (1977: 254- 255). In other words, such a sentence may be telling the Hearer different things.

What is of specific interest to my purposes is that it is the Hearer, and not the Speaker, who is in the better position to decide what information is being conveyed. For example, the new information which is here being added to what the Hearer already knows may be either a) that what the man is cutting is the tree (and not something else), b) what the man is doing to the tree is that he is cutting it (and not climbing it), or c) that the person who is cutting the tree is the man (and not the woman), knowing as he does already that the

man is cutting something, that he is doing something to a tree or that someone is cutting a tree, respectively.

We have seen, then, two types of pragmatic ambiguity: one deriving from indirect speech acts and the other from the distinction between what the Hearer already knows and what information is new to him. Once the possibility, and indeed the everyday "normality" of pragmatic ambiguity is established, it will be easy to see that it can be exploited by a Hearer for his own purposes. I suggest that Hearers often use such ambiguity to achieve objectives that may be hostile to the Speaker personally or may at the very least run counter to his intentions.

3. THE HEARER AS LIAR

Most face-to-face conversations are structured around some system of turn-taking on the part of the interlocutors, with propositions being put forward and questioned, challenged and rejected or, on the other hand, accepted and incorporated into the ongoing exchange. In many cases, the final version of the proposition as accepted will have been negotiated and re-negotiated in several turns and perhaps out of all recognition. Having focused briefly on pragmatic ambiguity, I now wish to add another element which frequently manifests itself in such to-and-fro exchanges, namely semantic meaning. Since the term "meaning" is used both in the pragmatic and in the semantic sense, there may be a danger of thinking that they are, in fact, the same thing. However, what a Speaker or an utterance means semantically is the information they convey or express, whereas to mean pragmatically refers to attempting to bring about some change in the Hearer's state or actions. Therefore a Hearer may ask for clarification of a Speaker's semantic or pragmatic meaning with a question like "What do you mean?" or "What does that mean?." In answer to these questions, the Speaker may reply: "I don't mean x, I mean y" or "I don't mean to Verb (1) you, I mean to Verb (2) you," as in "I don't mean a ball to play with, I mean a ball where you dance" or "I don't mean to insult you, I only mean to give you advice."

Just as a word like "ball" may refer to a toy or to a dance unless further clarified, so also very often one and the same (group of) words may be used to perform the act of advising, congratulating, accusing, warning, etc. Just as there is no infallible method of ensuring that what a Speaker means

semantically will be, or has been in a given case, understood by the Hearer in the sense intended by the Speaker, neither is there any foolproof way of ensuring that a Hearer will take, or has taken, the pragmatic meaning or force of an utterance in the sense intended.

The point I wish to make here is that, as a Speaker may mistakenly or deliberately say something that is untrue, so also the Hearer may mistakenly or deliberately "take up" (see Austin 1962: ch. IX) and react to some meaning or force that was not intended; he may be misled by the words into genuinely misinterpreting the semantic or the pragmatic meaning, or both, or he may feel tempted to accept one type of meaning and reject the other, since there is a fairly broad dichotomy between what is said and what is meant. If what is said stimulates or influences a certain type of reaction —positive or negative—, that reaction is likely in turn to condition at least to some extent the uptake (see Austin 1962: ch. IX) of the pragmatic force.

4. HOSTILE AND MISTAKEN INTERPRETATIONS

The types of situation in which a deliberately hostile uptake is likely are usually conflictual or adversarial before the utterance itself is spoken. Take the following, authentic, exchange, for which the setting was a dinner table:

> Father to Son: "If you ate more green vegetables, your spots would soon clear up."
> Angry Mother to Father: "Well, you can cook dinner tomorrow, then."

The pragmatic vagueness of the father's utterance allows the hostile mother deliberately to interpret the "advice to son" act as a "criticism of mother" act, for the benefit of the latter. The hostile response relies on the knowledge shared by all participants in the situation that Mother usually makes the meals, that it is therefore plausible that Son's eating green vegetables or not may depend on being given or not being given them at meal-times; if the latter "meaning" were the intended one, then the utterance could genuinely be seen as a criticism of Mother's cooking or choice of menus for the family.

I now wish to attempt an analysis of this kind of hostile reaction or perlocutionary effect with the aid of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson 1993). These authors ask how a Hearer

selects one from a number of possible resolutions to an ambiguity (for example in interpreting an implicature or in selecting the antecedent of reference). They suggest that the Hearer evaluates the "candidate solutions" according to their accessibility. This implies, in general terms, that the Hearer looks for an interpretation that is "optimally relevant," in the sense of yielding the greatest possible return in terms of contextual effects for the smallest processing effort on his own part. By "contextual effect" they mean that some existing assumption of the Hearer's is reinforced or else contradicted and eliminated, or that the new input combines with some such existing assumption to give a contextual implication. This is achieved with the least effort necessary to overcome any linguistic or psychological complexity found in the utterance, the accessibility of possible referents, disambiguations etc. and the accessibility of the contextual assumptions themselves. Sperber and Wilson also mention that, according to other, non-relevance, criteria, the Hearer may look for an interpretation that is merely true, informative and evidenced, consistent with the context or coherent with some prior discourse.

My purpose in alluding to these theories, or criteria, which purport to explain how a Hearer decides which interpretation to put on some utterance when more than one interpretation is available, is to show that they seem to presuppose that the Hearer is sincerely seeking the interpretation of the Speaker's utterance that will optimally accord semantically and pragmatically with the latter's intentions: at least that is how I understand them. An insincere Hearer, however, does not look for a) the particular interpretation that is "optimally relevant" in the straightforward sense of fitting in with the Speaker's intentions, b) an interpretation that is true, informative and evidenced, in any "normal" sense, or c) an interpretation that is coherent with prior discourse in the sense of what has taken place earlier in the same, or recent, communication between the same interlocutors. What such a Hearer seeks is any interpretation, however indirect, that is not totally inconsistent with the semantic meaning of the utterance and which allows the utterance to be interpreted in a way that is either hostile to the Speaker or to someone else, or favourable to the Hearer himself.

Let us take this initial explanation a little further. Sperber and Wilson argue that a Hearer interprets an utterance in an optimally relevant way, understanding "optimal relevance" as meaning that sufficient contextual effects to be worth the Hearer's attention are achieved and that it puts the Hearer to no gratuitous or unnecessary processing effort in achieving these effects. A conclusion to be drawn from this relevance-based criterion is,

according to Sperber and Wilson, that the first satisfactory interpretation is the only satisfactory one and is the one the Hearer "should" choose.

I believe that we can remain within the framework of Relevance Theory if we posit that what happens when a hostile interpretation is sought is this: the Hearer judges that he cannot make use for his own benefit or to the Speaker's detriment of the first legitimate interpretation, and therefore decides to go on to find a second or third interpretation that will fit in more fully with his own objectives, ignoring the Speaker's intentions even if they are perfectly clear to him. In other words, once the Speaker has placed an utterance at the disposal of the Hearer, it can be used by the latter in any way and for any purpose he chooses (within very broad limits of semantic and pragmatic meaning), irrespective of the purpose for which it was first intended. The fact that the processing effort is greater for a second or third interpretation than for the first "satisfactory" one is compensated for by achieving sufficient contextual effects to make it worth while, and this is provided for by Sperber and Wilson's theory (1986: 151-153), even though they do not say so explicitly. After all, their "first satisfactory interpretation" is not necessarily the "first chronological interpretation."

The Hearer may either take this course of action to attain some objectives of his own in a particular exchange or he may be induced to do so by recall of his experience of previous exchanges with the Speaker. In other words, a Hearer may sincerely believe that the Speaker has some indirect intentions and that the first relevant meaning that comes to his mind is probably not the correct one, or else he may simply realise that an overt reaction on his part to the first relevant interpretation will not help him to achieve his egotistic or hostile objectives. Tannen (1981: 222-229) reports that "misunderstandings," as she calls them, about what the Speaker meant are in fact often reinforced by repeated interaction between the same interlocutors. She states that interaction between married partners reveals the effects of different uses of indirectness over a period of time, which may strengthen mistaken judgements of each other's intentions or increase expectations that the other will behave in a certain way, perhaps a way that is experienced as stubborn, irrational or uncooperative, so that misjudgements are "calcified by the conviction of repeated experience" (1981: 225). Tannen suggests that such misunderstandings occur because the Hearer does not, despite past experience, expect to receive a message in a particular way, but continues to assume that it should or will come in a different way.

I have no reason to question Tannen's fascinating findings. I can only suggest that such reinforcements of genuine misunderstandings may be due,

not only to sincere mistakes regarding the Speaker's intentions and the ways in which he "should" formulate them, but to annoyance that has built up over time at the way the Speaker repeatedly conveys messages (just as annoyance can build up over the way a married partner squeezes a tube of toothpaste), or to ill will that has accumulated in relation to unrelated factors and which finds a vocal outlet in deliberate misinterpretation of utterances. It would be interesting to know whether such misinterpretations occur regularly in cases where it would serve the Hearer's immediate purpose not to misinterpret the Speaker, but I am not aware of any empirical work having been carried out on this point.

5. THE HEARER HEARD

J. L. Austin (1962) divided speech into locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts, the first being the raw speech which composes the linguistic surface of an utterance ("what the Speaker said"), the second being what the Speaker does, or the act he performs in speaking ("what he meant by what he said"), and the third being what the Speaker achieves by, or as a result of, speaking, such as the change brought about in the mind or the behaviour of the Hearer ("what he did to the Hearer"). Unlike the locutionary and the illocutionary acts, then, the perlocutionary act, force, or effect is at least to some extent within the control of the Hearer, since it depends, not merely on what the Speaker says or intends to do, but on how it is received, processed, assimilated and reacted to by the Hearer. Austin further distinguished the perlocutionary object from the perlocutionary sequel, the former being the direct or intended result of the illocutionary act, the latter being some more secondary consequence. Although this summary is quite crude, it will suffice to allow us to distinguish the Speaker's exclusive area of influence from the Hearer's sole or partial domain, which is what is of interest here. In his introduction to Discourse Analysis, Coulthard (1985: 9-20) brings together a Hearer-knows-best principle (see Edmondson 1981: 50) according to which linguistic analysts need not concern themselves with the Speaker's intention, because it is the Hearer's interpretation of the force of an utterance that determines how an interaction proceeds, and Labov's (1972) distinction between A-events, about which one interlocutor alone knows, B-events, about which the other interlocutor alone knows, and AB-events,

which are known to both. Labov explains that if interlocutor A makes a statement about a B-event, interlocutor B will hear it as a request for confirmation, rather than as a statement. However, if A's assumption about B's knowledge is inaccurate, in other words if A thinks B knows something which B does not in fact know, then A's intended request for confirmation will be heard by B as a statement of new information.

By loose analogy with the Labovian distinction, I wish to posit B-feelings, B-thoughts, B-values etc., which will act in conjunction with an incoming utterance to affect its intended force and bring it into line, so to speak, with the Hearer's own perception of what will be useful, in some sense, to him. Let me explain this. Labov suggests that a Speaker's intended request for confirmation is sincerely perceived, not as a request, but as a statement of fact by the Hearer when his information status is not what the Speaker assumed it to be; I am suggesting that the Hearer's feelings, thoughts, emotions, values, etc. (for example, annoyance, irritation, antagonism towards the Speaker, the subject under discussion or the world in general) may influence him not to accept the first relevant interpretation that can be used for his own benefit or against the Speaker's interest. The case of the mother's reaction to the suggestion that her son should eat more green vegetables exemplifies this antagonistic or hostile activity.

Let us now take this suggestion a little further. Just as the Hearer's feelings towards the Speaker, the subject of discussion or the world in general may influence his reaction to the utterance, other factors of a rather different nature may also play a part in this process. The Hearer may dislike certain forms of speech and may react directly to the language or to its connotations, rather than to its semantic or pragmatic import. An authentic example is the following: Wife uses a tag question after statements, not to request confirmation (which is the "standard" function of tag questions) but to indicate that the statement is an explanation of something that has gone before (see Rockwell 1974: 12), as in:

"She drank too much, didn't she?"

Husband dislikes this use of tag questions, because he is not sympathetic to his wife's wish to appear working class, of which this use of tag questions is indicative when they follow statements of events fully known to the Speaker herself; he therefore consistently reacts to them on their literal level, as if they were genuine requests for confirmation, saying something like:

"I don't know whether she did or not."

Lawyers frequently take up utterances at their literal value, in order to advance their client's case. For example, when asked if he hit the plaintiff, a defendant may answer:

"Why should I hit him?"

Although he is aware that this is a rhetorical question meaning "I had no reason to hit him and therefore I did not hit him," the Lawyer may retort:

"That's for you to tell me."

It is clear from this last example that the deliberate misinterpretation of semantic or pragmatic meaning is not always negatively or maliciously motivated. Indeed, it is sometimes the basic factor in jokes, whether intended or accidental. Let us see a few positive examples. A notice in a British airport duty-free shop reads:

"Boarding cards are required to make a purchase."

The pragmatic ambiguity of this authentic notice has certainly amused many passengers as they queue up to pay for their duty-free goods since, apart from indicating that they must show their boarding cards when paying, it can also be interpreted, with a little more effort, as making it obligatory for every boarding card to go to the till and buy something, thus providing an image that is truly outlandish. Similarly a packet of Tesco Apricot Crunchies carries on it the words:

"Made with 80% Recycled Board,"

where the ambiguity refers to the indeterminacy of the reference between the (inedible) packet itself and its (edible) contents. Finally, on this positive note, the leader of the British Liberal Democratic Party recently claimed in a television interview that

"Everyone has a right to clean streets,"

which allows a Hearer unsympathetic to the Speaker to understand that the latter is claiming, or perhaps planning, that everyone should be allowed to clean the streets.

6. CONCLUSION

When discussing the intent to deceive, philosophers (see for example Chisholm and Feehan 1977) sometimes classify the ways in which one person may deceive another into positive and negative, that is, deceit by commission or by omission. I have not yet seen any claim that a Hearer's deceit can be

just as definite, and just as devastating, as a Speaker's, and yet it seems clear that the arguments put forward in this paper tend to show that deceit can indeed work both ways. a

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