By Ira Noveck & Tiffany Morisseau
This book left a very positive impression on us both. It is practically a manifesto for clear thinking about doing proper Gricean analyses in applied areas of communication. Speaking our minds (SOM), which describes and reshapes the theoretical landscape in the evolutionary biology of communication, allowed us to compare and contrast that field of inquiry with the field of experimental pragmatics, the area we know best. Here is how the two are similar: Both fields make room for the Code model and a Gricean Ostensive-Inferential model, both recognize Grice's monumental proposal as important, and yet in each of our respective fields, it seems like a majority takes it for granted that the Code model should be the point of reference.

Another generally appreciated feature of the work is the way Thom clears away misconstruals and addresses incorrect assumptions, for example when he points out that shared function does not mean shared histories:

"ostensive communication is far more expressive than coded communication, but that is no argument in favour of continuity. To argue otherwise … is also to argue … that flying evolved from walking" (Chapter 2.7)

or when he refers to the qualitative difference between code as used in the Code model among his colleagues as opposed to the way it is used as linguistic code. Interestingly, he also goes on to point out how his colleagues use the word "mean" in a descriptive way ("territory marking 'means' 'do not encroach upon this territory'") whereas Gricean formulations use "mean" in a theoretical way that addresses speaker's intentions being recognized. This allowed us to appreciate a distinction when comparing our two areas: In evolutionary biology, defenders of the Code model recognize that the point of signals is to "do things to an audience" whereas those who implicitly adopt the Code model in our area are hardly concerned with that (their focus is mostly about determining the extent to which words and grammar capture extra-logical or extra-literal meaning).

As part of our effort to draw parallels and see where concepts in his academic world line up (or not) with ours, we were however drawn to one important difference between Thom's outlook on his field and our outlook on ours—the pragmatic phenomena that are being accounted for. Whereas his explanandum is any given convention (the way a community chooses a side of the road to drive on, the way a Pictionary game evolves, the "drift-to-the-arbitrary" in the evolution of writing symbols, finding a common language in intention-reading games etc.), ours is on-the-spot interpretations of utterances. For instance, while we both might be concerned with metaphors, Thom is interested in the way metaphors make their way more-or-less permanently into language (Chapter 5.1), while we are interested in the way an original metaphor is processed for the first time (and if it succeeds in being part of communication, how does that work). His question is how do individuals manage to build conventions that render communication expressively powerful. Our question is, how are we able to say and pragmatically understand an endless number of new utterances.

The upshot is that this leaves at least a couple of places where we are no longer working in parallel. While he is interested in the process of grammaticalization, the fact that historical changes observed in languages are "overwhelmingly unidirectional" (Chapter 5.5) has not been seriously investigated from an experimental pragmatics point of view (though historical linguists are interested in pursuing this line alongside experimental pragmatists, see Grossman & Noveck, 2015). In fact, we can go further and say that experimental investigations into conventions (conceptual pacts, lexical entrainment and the like) are said to pose a challenge to a Gricean picture (e.g. see Brennan and Clark's work, which shows how participants will use a more informative name, such as Golden Retriever, to be as informative as possible in a given situation but then will stick with it even later, when the more general term dog would do).

We have more than a passing interest in this misalignment because we would like to draw lessons from SOM that could have an impact in our area. However, we wonder about the extent to which that is possible. While SOM heralds the Ostensive-Inferential model, and Relevance Theory in particular, by underlining the advantages such models bring when compared to its rivals, the book—and perhaps it is inherent to the study of Language Evolution in general—is focused on different phenomena. While Thom's explanations are Grice-inspired, the examples seem to arrive at a nexus where Gricean explanations end and Lewisian concerns begin.

Given our shared theoretical commitments (i.e. in SOM and our own work), we have two reactions. One is that we suspect that there is a way to integrate Thom's framework into accounts of spontaneous pragmatic interpretation. For example, it strikes us as plausible to view coercive and cued actions as two flexible, non-overlapping categories of expressive verbal behavior at the moment of production (before an addressee provides a reaction). Our other reaction is to remain circumspect and conclude that the answer to our query (can the approach in Thom's book be reconciled with the worries of experimental pragmatics?) is, not readily (and that would take nothing away from the book's brilliance). However, we remain hopeful for the former, i.e. that Thom's framework can provide the means for one to align evolutionary biological accounts of language with the everyday comprehension of utterances.

References

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