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## Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma)

## Discussion note

## A methodological flaw? A reply to Korta and Perry

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 23 November 2018

[Kepa Korta and John Perry \(2008\)](#), “KP”, are among many authors, including [Stephen Levinson \(2000\)](#), that my paper, “Three Methodological Flaws of Linguistic Pragmatism”, charges with the flaw of confusing the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation ([2013b](#): 287–94). The metaphysics is concerned with *what constitutes* a meaning property of an utterance, the epistemology with *how a hearer discovers* that property. The meaning is constituted entirely by the speaker in producing the utterance and not by any interpretative process in the hearer.

In “Our alleged methodological flaw” (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9), KP respond:

This seems like an important distinction, and ignoring it would certainly be a flaw in a theory or an argument for a theory. But we do not ignore it, and it's not easy to see why Devitt or any other should think otherwise. (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9)

This is surprising.

[KP \(2008](#): 320), like [Levinson \(2000](#): 186–7), claim that there is a “pragmatic circle”. My response to this claim, quoted in their reply, is the crux of my charge:

This description of a “circle” is reminiscent of Levinson's, including the equivocation over ‘determining’: if the initial “determining” claim is to be true it has to be epistemic, yet to generate the circle it has to be constitutive. ([2013b](#): 292).

They respond:

Our description is certainly reminiscent of Levinson's. But, if there is any equivocation in Levinson's, this is not repeated in ours. When we talk of determination here, we mean *epistemic* determination; that is, we are talking about the hearer's understanding process. (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9)

I had three reasons for thinking otherwise.

First, KP's description is reminiscent of Levinson's. As KP note (note 2), their 2008 paper did not cite Levinson's account of “Grice's circle” (2000: 186), but their subsequent discussions have often done so ([2011](#): 11, 147–8; [2013](#): 292). In these discussions, KP imply that their circle is *the same as* Levinson's. And the reminiscent description certainly led me to think that these alleged circles were the same. So, let's consider the relevant passage from Levinson, most of which is quoted by KP in citing Levinson:

Grice's account makes implicature dependent on a prior determination of “the said”. The said in turn depends on disambiguation, indexical resolution, reference fixing, not to mention ellipsis unpacking and generality narrowing. But each of these processes, which are prerequisites to determining the proposition expressed, may themselves depend crucially on processes that look indistinguishable from implicatures. Thus what is said seems both to determine and to be determined by implicature. Let us call this *Grice's circle*.... Then truth-conditional content depends on most, perhaps all, of the known species of pragmatic inference... ([Levinson, 2000](#): 186–87).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.11.009>

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I quote this passage a few pages before discussing KP and argue (2013b: 289–90) that Levinson, and Robyn Carston (2004: 69) in her endorsement of Levinson, equivocate over “determination”. Briefly, ‘the said’, and implicatures, are *constitutively* determined by states of the speaker not by the hearer’s pragmatic inferences; the hearer’s *discovery* of the implicature is dependent on the prior *epistemic* determination of ‘the said’ by pragmatic inferences. If this is right, and KP’s circle is indeed Levinson’s, then of course they too are equivocating. Presumably KP think that Levinson is not equivocating, despite the evidence that he is; or that their circle is not his, despite what they imply; or both.

Second, consider KP’s earlier talk of the determination of what is said in the following passage:

the natural dividing line between semantics and pragmatics is based on the intuitive concept of *what is said*. Setting subtleties aside, Grice’s picture is that what the speaker says is determined by the semantics of the sentence he uses, and then pragmatics takes over... (2008: 348).

I took this “natural dividing line” to be clearly about constitutive not epistemic determination. The line is between a “semantics” concerned with what is said by an utterance, *constitutively* determined by the semantics of its sentence, and a “pragmatics” concerned with the utterance’s other properties *constitutively* determined otherwise by the speaker (Devitt, 2013a: 103–04). As KP put it nicely in a later work, the distinction is between “‘the proposition expressed’...and implicatures and any other aspect of meaning not pertaining to the truth-conditional content of the utterance” (2013: 292). The displayed passage makes no sense if “determined” is construed epistemically.

In that later work, KP go on to find the above distinction too simple because “figuring out the reference of many natural language expressions seems to require...pragmatic reasoning” leading to “Grice’s circle”; “the processes of intention recognition that invoke the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims seem to be needed to determine the proposition expressed by the utterance” (2013: 292–3). This “determine” has to be epistemic for this passage to be true. But in assessing the distinction our concern should be with what *constitutively* determines the proposition expressed. So, this later discussion exemplifies, more clearly than the 2008 one, just the methodological flaw I am criticizing: the hearers’ pragmatic reasoning, processes of intention recognition, and the like, do not constitute the proposition expressed.

My third reason was that only if there was equivocation could there even *appear* to be a problematic “pragmatic circle”. KP disagree:

Grice’s circle arises if we take this *general pattern for the hearer’s working out of implicatures* to require the identification of what the speaker said to get started, as Grice’s suggests, and at the same time we assume that the same pattern is involved in the hearer’s process of understanding what is said. (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9)

But there is no *circle*, just a *sequence* of pragmatic processes of understanding. On the Gricean picture, as KP emphasize, the hearer first figures out what is said and, on the basis of that, goes on to figure out any implicatures. Let’s go along with the idea that both these figurings fit “the same pattern”. This is just to say that they are the same *type* of process, perhaps a type of inference. So *one token* of that type of process yields what is said and then, on that basis, *another token* yields the implicatures. There is no circle; just one inference providing premises for the next.

KP also take exception to a footnote (2013b: 292 n. 9). They quote passages from Perry’s introduction of his notion of unarticulated constituents – an admirable notion that I defend ([forthcoming](#)) – and rightly point out that “the suggestion... that ‘the reference of ‘unarticulated constituents’ is constituted by how hearers would understand the utterance in the context,’...is not there” (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9). But these passages do not include the one from Crimmins and Perry (1989) that the footnote cites, as they appreciate. So they turn to that article, concluding a brief discussion: “There is nothing in this article to suggest that the unarticulated constituent of a belief report is determined by the hearer’s inferences on the matter” (Korta and Perry, 2019: 175–9). Well, there *is* something there to suggest that that constituent of *a weather report* is determined by the hearer’s inferences; it’s in the passage I cite (pp. 699–700)! Consider the conclusion of that passage:

a change in wording can affect the unarticulated constituent, even though it is not a change in an expression that designates that constituent. Suppose I am in Palo Alto talking on the phone to someone in London; we both know that it is morning in Palo Alto and evening in London. If I say, “It’s exactly 11 A.M.,” I will be taken to be talking about the time in Palo Alto; if I had said, in the same context, “It’s exactly 8 P.M.,” I would be taken to be talking about the time in London.

The important principle to be learned is that a change in wording can precipitate a change in propositional constituents, even when the words do not stand for the constituents. (p. 700).

The change in the wording alone does not affect the unarticulated constituent, it affects how that constituent is interpreted. The unarticulated constituent of “It’s exactly 11 A.M.” would be London if the speaker, for whatever crazy reason, had London in mind, even though he would surely be taken to be speaking of Palo Alto.

This exchange prompts me to emphasize that my claim is *not* that the authors criticized in my paper (2013b) *always* take epistemic processes in hearers to constitute meanings. Indeed, one frequently comes across the idea that meanings are constituted by the intentions of speakers.<sup>1</sup> The problem is that authors *quite often* take meanings to be constituted by those epistemic processes.

<sup>1</sup> I have a small problem with that too; Devitt (2015: 110–11).

I hope to have shown why I and others might well think that KP's 2008 paper confuses the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation, even if the paper does not in fact do so.

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