

Sociophonetics, semantics, and intention

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Overview. As distinct approaches to studying language meaning expand and increasingly intersect, there is much to be gained from closely comparing different types and notions of meaning. Invoking Grice (1957), Campbell-Kibler (2008, 2009) observes that the role of intention seems to differ in the meanings of primary interest in (i) variationist sociolinguistics and (ii) semantics and pragmatics. The central goal of the present work is to clarify the nature of intention attribution and, in turn, the nature of these two types of meaning.

Ascribing intention. Herein, for a consequence of an action to have been INTENDED by an agent in the relevant sense means that the agent (consciously or not) performed the action as they did in part in order to effect that consequence. At the heart of this work is the question of when a consequence of an action is taken to be intended in this sense. To that question, I offer (1). Critical in (1) is the notion that actions come with various potential costs (e.g. requiring great effort to perform) and benefits (e.g. being likely to effect a desired outcomes). Depending on an agent's goals, then, a given action will appear more/less attractive.

- (1) ATTRIBUTING INTENTION. Suppose O observes agent A performing action α with potential or actual consequence c . Let M be the set of alternative actions that O believes A would have thought were available to A and more likely than α to effect c ; and let L be the set of alternative actions that O believes A would have thought were available to A and less likely than α to effect c . O is more likely to believe A intended to effect c via α :
 - a. The more O thinks *ex ante* that A would view c favorably
 - b. The more likely O thinks A would have thought α was to effect c
 - c. The less O thinks A believed A was forgoing by selecting α over elements of M
 - d. The more O thinks A believed A was forgoing by selecting α over elements of L

The first factor listed in (1) is perhaps obvious: We're more likely to think A intended to effect c the more we think that A would desire c . If we think c runs counter to A 's goals, we have relatively little reason to believe that A would try to effect c . (1b) is similarly straightforward. If, for instance, we believe A had no idea that α might effect c , we have no reason to believe that A performed α to effect c .

(1c) and (1d) center on how the action relates to alternative actions. (1c) says that our believing that A intended some outcome c is inversely related to how much we think A thought A was forgoing (in terms of benefits less costs) by selecting α over available alternatives that were apparently more likely than α to effect c . To illustrate, imagine a scenario in which there's an alternative α' that's nearly identical to α except that we think that A views α' as far more likely to effect c while being less costly. α' might then appear to have a good deal to offer relative to α , being very similar to the action A opted for and at a lower cost, and, as predicted by (1c), we would have reason to doubt that A intended for α to effect c : if effecting c were an important goal for A , why not opt for the alternative far more likely to bring that about and save in terms of costs? A similar logic underlies (1d), which says that we're more likely to think A intended to effect c the more we think A would think alternatives less likely to effect c had to offer relative to α . Consider a case with an alternative that's essentially the same as α except that we think A would believe it to be only a bit less likely than α to effect c but far less costly—making it an ostensibly attractive option. In that case, A 's opting for α offers evidence that effecting c was important to A , since A incurred far greater cost for just a small increase in the likelihood of effecting c .

The remainder of the paper examines a series of implications of (1) for different kinds of linguistic meaning, focusing especially on how the meanings of primary interest in variationist sociolinguistics differ from those of primary interest in semantics and pragmatics. A subset of the implications are presented below.

Intentionality in sociophonetic and semantic meaning. Variationist sociolinguistics has increasingly focused on how the connotations of a given form relate to the distribution of its use (e.g. Eckert 2008). The idea is that over time forms accrue social significance based on the contexts in which they appear, and, in turn, speakers wishing to evoke that social significance will have reason to employ forms that bear those associations. A classic case is the apical *-in'* form of the English *-ing* suffix, the former of which is associated with things like casualness and lack of education (Campbell-Kibler, 2008), making it potentially useful where one wishes to seem approachable, but potentially unattractive where one wishes to display, say, learnedness.

Recent work (Burnett, 2017, 2019) has attempted to capture these dynamics from the perspective of game-theoretic pragmatics. Roughly speaking, in those frameworks, the dynamics are framed as a cooperative game whereby the speaker *S* attempts to signal to the hearer *H* something *c* about *S*'s persona based on the phonetic form that *S* selects, where both *S* and *H* win if (i) *H* realizes that *S* is attempting to signal *c* and (ii) updates their beliefs to include *c*. But as (1) illuminates, that approach captures only a special case of how social significance is implied/inferred in practice. E.g., not every inference drawn from the way a person speaks is assumed to be intended. Suppose e.g. *S* is speaking a dialect of English that sounds to hearer *H* like a U.S. dialect and that, as far as *H* knows, for *S* to use a substantially different phonology would require greater effort and sound forced. *H* may then infer that *S* is from the U.S., but, barring special contexts, has little reason to believe that *S* intended to suggest U.S. nationality by their phonetics. (1) explains why. Again, as far as *H* knows, alternatives considerably less likely to suggest that *S* is from the U.S. would require more effort and sound forced. In turn, such alternatives apparently have little to offer *S*. Thus, by (1d), there's little reason to think that *S* specifically intended to signal being from the U.S. phonetically. This is a very general dynamic: believing a speaker *S* intended to effect something *c* by their utterance is facilitated by believing that *S* had an attractive alternative available that *S* thought would be less likely to effect *c*. Otherwise, *S*'s choice and form of utterance might have been motivated entirely by considerations orthogonal to the likelihood of effecting *c*. By the same token, *S* forgoing an apparently attractive alternative in favor of an utterance more likely to effect *c* provides some evidence that effecting *c* was among *S*'s goals.

Two crucial things follow (among others), *ceteris paribus*: (i) speakers are more likely to be taken to intend something by their phonetics when it appears that they're deviating from their normal phonology (cf. Podesva 2011); and (ii) meaning based in the connotations of phonetic forms is more amenable to being perceived as unintended than that derived from a form's semantic content. Speaking requires phonetics, which opens the question of whether the phonetic nature of the utterance was simply in service attempting to articulate the relevant morphosyntactic objects without expending excessive effort. But the picture is different for the semantics of morphosyntactic objects. Being convinced that an aspect of an utterance wasn't intended to suggest anything at all is facilitated by being convinced that, given the speaker's other goals and constraints, there was no reasonably good alternative to that aspect available. Morphosyntactic objects in most cases do have accessible alternatives, often including saying nothing at all. It is indeed generally very strange (with some exceptions to be discussed) to issue a morphosyntactic object, with all of its encoded semantic meaning, with no intention of suggesting something involving that semantic meaning.

By the same token, I argue that carefully considering the role of intention attribution in phonetically-based social meaning sheds light on what we read into the semantic content of others' utterances and lays bare the contingent and performative nature of all meaning in practice. For instance, it is clear that achieving one's sociophonetic ends sometimes requires having one's intention to do so go *unrecognized*. If one wishes to sound, say, cool, one had better hope that their intent to do so goes undetected—trying to seem cool is the antithesis of cool. Perhaps less obviously, however, carrying off one's intended communicative goal based in semantic content means delivering a credibly sincere performance, which, as *Hamlet's* Queen Gertrude shows us, in part means not overdoing it.

A richer understanding of the attribution of intention thus illuminates the dynamics underlying meaning in practice—from the unintended to the intended; from the sociophonetic to the semantic.

References

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