

POSTPRINT

Introduction

Meaning in interaction

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This editorial to the Special Issue on “Meaning in Interaction” introduces to the approach of Interactional Semantics, which has been developed over the last years within the framework of Interactional Linguistics. It discusses how “meaning” is understood and approached in this framework and lays out that Interactional Semantics is interested in how participants clarify and negotiate the meanings of the expressions that they are using in social interaction. Commonalities and differences of this approach with other approaches to meaning are flagged, and the intellectual origins and precursors of Interactional Semantics are introduced. The contributions to the Special Issue are located in the larger field of research.

Keywords: Interactional Linguistics, Interactional Semantics, meaning, semantics

“[T]he conception of meaning as contained in an utterance is false and futile. A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered.”

Malinowski (1923, p. 307)

Over the last 25 years, interactional linguists have studied linguistic structures in numerous languages and types of interaction (for an overview, see Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018). The focus has been on grammar (e.g., Ochs, Schegloff & Thompson 1996; Selting & Couper-Kuhlen 2001), prosody and phonetics (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 1996; Barth-Weingarten & Szczepek-Reed 2014). In contrast, semantics has received only little attention to date from an interactional perspective (but see Deppermann & Spranz-Fogasy 2002; Deppermann 2007, 2011; Bilmes 2015; Greco & Traverso 2016 and some chapters in Hakulinen & Selting 2005). This may be somewhat surprising, as Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics regularly state as their primary object of interest the study of participants’ “understandings” (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974: 729), “sense making practices” (Pomerantz & Fehr 1997: 64), “meaningful conduct of people in society” (ibid.: 65), or – in linguistic terms – the “meaning of a linguistic phenomenon” (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018: 24). Consequently, “meaning” often features in descriptions and analyses of functions and uses of linguistic and embodied

practices. However, “meaning” is not used as a technical term. The word is used to refer to a variety of semiotic and functional properties, such as reference, propositional content, action ascription, discursive function, inferences, expectations concerning next actions, affective overtones, positioning, etc. Such manifestations of “meaning” hence seem to be ubiquitous. But “meaning” has rarely been addressed as an object of systematic study in Conversation Analysis or Interactional Linguistics. This is due to various (good) reasons. Distancing themselves from a semiotic approach to social practice, conversation analysts insist on the primacy of action over (semantic) meanings (e.g., Maynard 2011). The social organization of interaction builds on actions and not on propositional meanings. Moreover, traditionally the study of meaning seems to invite or even require the recourse to cognitive notions and speculation. Conversely, it cannot sufficiently rest on participants’ displayed orientations and is therefore not sufficiently accessible to the analytical apparatus of Conversation Analysis (Deppermann 2024). Finally, as adumbrated above, “meaning” is a notoriously fuzzy notion that is hard to delineate – in particular, if one does not want to start with a theoretical stipulation of the subject matter (as is usually done in other areas of linguistics and philosophy), but rather tries to analyze what may count as “meaning” for participants.

In this Special Issue, “meaning in interaction” is understood within the context of an Interactional Semantics approach (Deppermann 2011; Greco & Traverso 2016). Interactional semantic research investigates how participants in conversation clarify and negotiate the local meaning of the expressions they use – be it single words, phrases, or other syntactic constructions (Deppermann 2020, 2024). This initial definition of the subject of this Special Issue implies some important properties of meaning in conversation:

- Meaning is situated: Meaning that is relevant in conversation is local. The situated meaning of an expression is a meaning that applies precisely to this moment of conversation. The same linguistic structures (words, phrases) can have completely different meanings in other situations and sequential environments. Likewise, facets of meaning are also often highly context-specific and cannot simply be derived from context-free routines.
- Meaning is social: It is crucial for the creation of intersubjectivity in interaction that the participants in the interaction arrive at a sufficiently shared assignment of meaning to an utterance (cf. Schegloff 1992; Sidnell 2014; Deppermann 2015). This importantly includes recipients’ activities of co-constructing meanings, by actions such as repair-initiation (e.g., Dingemanse et al. 2014; Selting 1987; Deppermann this issue; De Stefani this issue), formulation (e.g., Heritage & Watson 1979), or collaborative completion (e.g., Lerner 1991).

- Meaning is public: Shared meanings are mutually displayed meanings (cf. Schegloff 1997). This often, but not always necessarily, involves recipients' understanding of what a speaker meant. Participants may also agree on a meaning that was not intended by the producer of the original utterance, but which participants nonetheless accept (Hinnenkamp 1998; Haugh 2008), e.g., because the intended meaning was not yet so specific, or it was not accepted or understood by the addressee, and a more acceptable meaning is agreed upon.
- Meaning is constituted: Meaning is not simply retrieved from a mental lexicon, but must be produced for the specific circumstances and contexts of the interaction (Deppermann 2007), which can require that participants use practices specialized in meaning clarification (Deppermann 2024). This necessity is quite obvious for the production of reference, which is most often situated.

In Interactional Semantics, meaning is studied with respect to the role it plays in the current context of action and understanding in social interaction. However, the analytical focus is not on participants' actions *per se*, but on the expressions they use and on the practices by which these expressions receive their locally relevant meanings. This includes the study of meaning clarifications and negotiations that go beyond issues of understanding and that have other interactional consequences (De Stefani this issue).

The above considerations allow us to draw first distinctions between Interactional Semantics and other approaches to semantics:

- In contrast to Lexical Semantics and structural approaches of compositional, taxonomic and word-field relationships (e.g., Cruse 1986; Murphy 2010), Interactional Semantics is not interested in the semantic structure of word-meanings or semantic relations between entries of the lexicon in the system of a language, but in meanings in situated use.
- In contrast to cognitive approaches, the focus is not on knowledge structures of the mental lexicon (e.g., Aitchison 2012) or psycholinguistic processes of language processing (e.g., Levelt 1989), but on practices of meaning clarification in observable interactional action. Of course, participants in interaction bring linguistic knowledge along and perform mental operations of perception and reasoning (see Geeraerts 2021). Both are essential for the situated constitution of meaning, but they are not an object of Interactional Semantics.
- In contrast to usage-based corpus linguistics (e.g., Glynn & Fisher 2010), the object of investigation is not usual, frequent patterns of co-occurrence linked to specific lexemes, but situated practices of meaning constitution. It

is beyond question that lexical co-occurrences and lexico-grammatical constructions are crucial for the local constitution of meaning; the (mutual) constraints that linguistic context poses for the interpretation of expressions always plays an important role in interactional analyses as well. However, the primary interest of Interactional Semantics lies in practices that usually operate on a larger scale than just in the immediate syntactic context and that are not word-specific. Moreover, Interactional Semantics is interested in the broader interactional context of meaning negotiation and does not restrict the analysis to the framework of the clause (or the KWIC [keyword in context] view of corpus data as far as methodology is concerned).

A crucial difference between the interactional semantic approach and other semantic approaches is therefore that it is not concerned with context-free, lexical meanings or default meanings and meaning potentials (Norén & Linell 2007) of expressions, but with the analysis of what is meant and/or understood *in situ*. This local meaning can certainly correspond to a lexical meaning. However, it can also be much more specific or, conversely, more vague or fragmentary and sometimes completely distinct from conventionalized meanings.

Since the study of Interactional Semantics is still in its beginnings, it is premature to try to delineate its scope in any definitive way. Yet, there are important precursors and different approaches that have contributed to this area of research.

Garfinkel's ethnomethodological studies of formal structures of practical actions identified indexicality as a pervasive feature of all language use (Garfinkel 1967). Building on Schütz's reflections on *Sinn* ('sense') (Schütz 1932, § 5, § 27 and elsewhere), Garfinkel acknowledges the irreducible situatedness of meanings. This situatedness necessarily implies vagueness and indexicality of meanings, because it is not possible to express all facets of meaning that play a role for the proper understanding of the situated use of some expression (Garfinkel 1967). When trying to define the meanings of expressions being used, the definition must make use of other expressions that would themselves be in need being defined as well, *et cetera ad infinitum* (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970). If meaning is vague and indexical, intersubjective meanings require a shared unexpressed background of language use and the application of shared formal practices of understanding, in line with Schütz's (1932) notion of "idealization". Indeed, the basic ethnomethodological notion of being a "member" (Garfinkel 1967) is tied to the competent application of these background assumptions and practices. The irremediable indexicality and vagueness of open-ended meanings implies that intersubjective meanings cannot be conceived of as identical mental representations, but as meanings shared for all practical purposes, which prove their validity by enabling successful joint action. From an ethnomethodological point of view, the

assumption of stable, context-free meanings is an illusion, because flexibility of meanings and the need for situated, yet never complete interpretation is irremediable (Lieberman 2012).

The Garfinkelian approach is concerned with (presumably) omni-relevant properties of meaning and formal practices operative in engendering understanding and intersubjectivity, but does not study particular linguistic practices. In contrast, another ethnomethodological approach, membership categorization analysis (MCA), investigates particular semantic practices, namely, social categorizations. MCA originated in Sacks's (1992) lectures and was initially interested in the organization of membership categorization devices (MCDs), which include rules for the assembly of interrelated categories (like 'mother/child' in the MCD 'family' vs. 'adult/child' in the MCD 'age'; Sacks 1972) and associated category-bound activities and predicates (see also Jayyusi 1984), as well as maxims of sense-making. Although MCA bears some resemblance to structuralist approaches, e.g., of kinship classification in Linguistic Anthropology (Goodenough 1965), it is clearly a sociological, not a linguistic approach. MCA approached categories as a way to probe into participants' understandings of culture (Hester & Eglin 1997) and social structure (Coulter 1996). MCA is interested in the social properties, values and expectations associated with certain categories, rather than in linguistic issues like, e.g., the relationship between categories and their labels, the grammatical properties of the latter, or the use of categories in performing social actions.

While MCA concerns category-memberships and properties assigned to people, a related line of research studies the selection of terms for reference (Schegloff 1972, 1996; Sacks & Schegloff 1979). In linguistic terms, MCA is rather concerned with the semasiological question of category-label meanings, while referential studies concern the onomasiological question of how to label a certain referent so that it becomes recognizable for an interlocutor in a given interactional context (see also Enfield & Stivers 2007 on person-reference and Debois & De Stefani 2022 on related phenomena in the field of Interactional Onomastics). Yet, both membership categorization and reference transcend the categorization of, and reference to, persons (Bilmes 2022; see also Mondada this issue). Objects, events, actions, perceptions, etc. are categorized and referred to as well – their study is only in its very beginnings (see, e.g., De Stefani 2019; Mondada this issue).

A major innovation and extension of the scope of MCA is Jack Bilmes's (2011, 2015) Occasioned Semantics. Starting from MCA (see Bilmes 2009), but also appealing to Frake's (1962) anthropological and taxonomic approach, Bilmes showed that participants in interaction build themselves relationships between categories in their talk as they go along. In particular in activities such as argumentation (Bilmes 2020) and narrative (Bilmes 2011), people regularly create

local taxonomic relationships between the terms they use, such as contrasts, lists, subcategorizations, generalizations (Hauser 2011), etc. These taxonomic relationships oftentimes are not instantiations of generalizable membership categorization devices, but they are locally produced, flexible *ad hoc* relationships, which serve participants' pragmatic purposes and which can be reworked later in the interaction.

While Bilmes's Occasioned Semantics is mainly interested in the interpretive properties and the rhetorical effects of the taxonomic relationships participants create in their talk, the study of meta-semantic practices, which is key to Interactional Semantics, focuses less on the emerging taxonomies than on the linguistic design of the practices and the interactional sequences by which the local meaning of expressions is clarified and negotiated (Deppermann 2020, 2024, this issue). Similar to Bilmes, Interactional Semantics emphasizes the importance of participants' local practices by which they provide the expressions they are using with their locally relevant meanings. These practices can be taxonomic, e.g., contrasting (Deppermann 2005) or exemplifying (Lee & Mlynář 2023). Other practices are, e.g., defining (Deppermann 2016, 2020, this issue; Deppermann & De Stefani 2019; De Stefani 2005; De Stefani & Sambre 2016; Helmer 2020; Schmale 2016; Traverso & Ravazzolo 2016), specifying (Deppermann this issue; De Stefani 2020), formulating (Heritage & Watson 1979; Deppermann 2011), or displaying that an expression is not used in its prototypical meaning (Norén & Linell 2007; Linell & Lindström 2016). All of these practices are realized by particular language-specific linguistic practices indexing the meta-semantic practice being performed. Moreover, while Bilmes focused on the taxonomic structures that participants accomplish within lengthy turns-at-talk, the study of meta-semantic practices also includes meta-semantic practices that extend across sequences. A most eminent case is the organization of particular forms of repair that are specifically designed to solve problems of meaning and reference (see already Selting 1987; Dingemanse et al. 2014). The need for semantic repair can occasion self-initiated self-repairs (Shor & Marmorstein this issue) or other-initiated self-repairs (Deppermann this issue; De Stefani this issue), by which meanings are modified and thereby (although often implicitly) made more obvious (Shor & Marmorstein this volume), or by which they are made more explicit and determinate (Deppermann this volume). The case of repair, however, most clearly shows that meta-semantic practices that are *prima facie* produced in the service of clarifying meanings may serve other purposes as well, such as criticizing the other's use of an expression or disagreeing (De Stefani this issue; Günthner 2015).

Another way into Interactional Semantics would be to study the use of single linguistic expressions (words) in social interaction. This approach, which could be termed 'Interactional Lexicology', is still in an embryonic stage. There are only


few studies that have focused on the interactional practices used to provide some particular lexical item with its locally relevant meaning in the same language (Goodwin 1997 on *black*; Deppermann 2019 on *Kultur*, ‘culture’). However, there are numerous studies on meaning explanation in classroom interaction and in L1/L2-interaction (e.g., Weingarten 1988; Lüdi 1991; Fazel Lauzon 2014; Kääntä et al. 2016), in particular in the context of understanding problems. Studies on interactional morphology so far have been scarce (but see Raymond 2022) and have not focused on semantic issues. Helmer (this issue) is unique in this respect, discussing the resources that participants use in making sense of ad hoc word-formations.

This Special Issue is dedicated to the memory of Jack Bilmes (1940–2021). Over many years, he has insisted on the importance of studying meaning in interaction for a better understanding of how people make sense of themselves as social actors and of their relationships, and how they pursue their interactional business in the face of often (at least potentially) critical or even hostile interlocutors. Jack was always an independent and open-minded thinker. While EMCA has been his scientific home base, he closely followed developments in anthropology, linguistics, and philosophical pragmatics, and integrated ideas from these fields in unique and fruitful ways. Since bringing together these lines of research very much resonates with the mission of Interactional Linguistics, this journal is the perfect site to commemorate and honor Jack’s intellectual achievements. Jack was supposed to contribute a paper to the panel on meaning in interaction held at the 17th International Pragmatics Conference in late June 2021, which was the starting point for working on this Special Issue. Due to his death on May 17, 2021, he could not attend the conference. We think of him with great gratitude for his inspiration and encouragement.

Funding

Research funded by Helsingin Yliopisto (Helsinki University Humanities Programme (WBS7400111).) to Arnulf Deppermann.

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Publication history

Date received: 29 January 2024
Date accepted: 16 February 2024
Published online: 18 March 2024