On Interpretive Use of Language

Eiichi Yamamoto (Kansai University)

1 Introduction

Sperber and Wilson (1986) call our attention to an interpretive dimension of language use and argue that the role it plays in verbal communication has been grossly underestimated(1). Indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere(2), the interpretive use of language is a pervasive phenomenon; in fact, it is more pervasive than is supposed by Sperber and Wilson themselves. To make their point, for example, they provide us with some instances of interpretive use, such as reported speech and irony, and propose a notion of *attributed thought* which they claim must be involved in the mechanism for producing interpretive utterances. As we shall see in later sections, however, their proposal is at best a rough approximation of what happens in the domain of interpretive use, covering only part of a wider range of linguistic phenomena that should have been included in their original arguments. Thus, my purpose here is to present more evidence that exemplifies an interpretive aspect of language use and to discuss in detail the mechanism involved, in order to get closer to a general framework of pragmatics, as was originally intended by Sperber and Wilson.

2 An Interpretive Aspect of Language Use

2. 1 Reported Speech

Reported speech is a typical example of what Sperber and Wilson call the interpretive use of language. Let us consider the following set of exchanges between Peter and Mary(3).

(1) **Peter:** And what did the inn-keeper say?
Mary: Je l'ai cherché partout!

(2) **Peter:** And what did the inn-keeper say?
Mary: I looked for it everywhere.

(3) **Peter:** And what did the inn-keeper say?
Mary: He has looked for your wallet everywhere. I don't believe him, though.

In (1), Mary's utterance is a direct quotation of the inn-keeper, who happened to speak in French. In (2), on the other hand, her utterance is just a translation of the inn-keeper's words. What about the first part of Mary's utterance in (3)? Although it is neither a direct quotation nor a translation, it is again a report of what the inn-keeper said to Mary. In spite of the apparent difference in syntactic forms, what is common in all of these utterances is the fact that they are *interpretations* of a thought which the inn-keeper expressed, or which Mary thinks he entertained.

In Sperber and Wilson's terms, these utterances are all *representations* of a speech, or thought which the speaker attributes to someone else. Since an interpretation is not something we find out there, but something we get out of a context using an infinite number of background assumptions, it is likely to be a speaker's personal assessment of a thought attributable to the addressee. Consider (4).

(4) **Peter:** And what did the inn-keeper say?
Mary: We won't bother go to the police, he thinks, and so he can safely keep the wallet(4).

In this case, except for the parenthetical 'he thinks' in the middle of it, Mary's utterance is a personal report of a thought which she somehow has every reason to attribute to the inn-keeper.

Notice that Mary's utterances we have discussed so far have something in common: in neither of these cases does Mary commit herself to the existence of the state of affairs described by her utterance. In other words, these utterances are just faithful or almost faithful representations of what (the speaker thinks) someone else has said or thought. This is what makes interpretive use different from descriptive use of language in which a speaker commits himself to the truth of a state of affairs.

2. 2 Irony

Irony is another instance of the interpretive use of language. It again involves an interpretation of a thought entertained by someone other than the speaker. Consider (5).

(5) **Peter:** It's a lovely day for a picnic.
[*They go for a picnic and suddenly it begins to pour.*]
Mary *(sarcastically)* : It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed(5).

Although Mary's utterance is identical with that of Peter's, she does not simply claim that the state of affairs described by her utterance holds true. Rather, she calls Peter's attention to the opinion or thought she attributes to him. Then, by dissociating herself from that opinion, she tries to convey a negative attitude to it. In this way, when an utterance is made in contradictory circumstances like the one above, and with proper intonation contour, it can be regarded as ironical.

It is important to note in passing that a thought which a speaker attributes to someone else does not have to be mentioned by any specific person; it may be one which at least the speaker *thinks* is shared by those involved in the verbal interaction. Imagine a situation, for example, in which Mary and Peter set out on a picnic on a fine morning and a few hours later they are caught in a heavy downpour. Even though there is no explicit mention of weather, Mary's utterance in (5) would again serve as an irony if it is made in a proper tone of voice. For it is apparent from the context that her comment refers back to a thought which she thinks she obviously shares with Peter and then expresses a negative assessment of the thought; e.g. they should not have set out in the first place.

Or the thought may be shared by people in general as in the case of traditional wisdom.

(6) More haste, less speed.

This utterance makes sense if it is taken as an interpretation of a thought which *every* member of the community shares with one another.

3 Case Study

3. 1 Conversational Metaphors

We have seen in the preceding sections that interpretive use of language is involved in reported speech and irony. However, this is not the whole story. Although Sperber and Wilson do claim that metaphor also exploits the interpretive aspect of language use, a closer look at empirical data, especially those from spoken discourse, reveals that things are more complicated than Sperber and Wilson think they are.

Consider the following utterance.

(7) Fiction is by far the best vaccine against reality[(6)]. (Suarez, G.: *Rowing in the Wind*, 1987)

The combination of "fiction" and "vaccine" in the form of X is Y is quite unusual and thus it is easily recognized as a metaphor. Sperber and Wilson would say that the utterance is a less than literal interpretation of the speaker's thought. They would also say that the utterance would convey an array of contextual implications which would otherwise never be passed on to the addressee. The above example would contextually imply, for example, that reading fiction is a very good way for those who suffer harsh realities in life to alleviate their pains.

Nevertheless, for all the allegedly rich array of potential implications, the use of such lexical items as "vaccine" in this example would be a bit of a surprise to the addressee *unless* he is given a proper context. To put it differently, a semantically anomalous pairing like this in a fleeting interaction requires too much processing effort on the part of the addressee. To use Sperber and Wilson's terms, this would be a case in which *processing effort* far exceeds *contextual effects*(7).

Thus a speaker is always expected to try to reduce the amount of processing effort to be imposed on the addressee by using as many contextual resources as possible. Actually, this is what happened when the speaker uttered (7): he was a doctor, and the addressee knew it. Then with these contextual assumptions in mind, the speaker deliberately chose "vaccine" among other lexical items so as to make his point. In spite of the apparent incongruity of the word, therefore, it helps facilitate, rather than discourage, the addressee's understanding of the metaphor. The utterance is *interpretive* in the sense that the speaker searches the preceding context for possible interpretations which he thinks he shares with the addressee, and produces the metaphor based on one of these interpretations, i.e., that he is a doctor.

By the same token, each of the following metaphors used in actual discourse also serves as an instance of the interpretive use of language.

(8) Women are a map. (Ward, V & L. Nowra: *Map of the Human Heart*, 1992)

(9) We would be history. (Boam, J.:*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989)

The utterance in (8) is made by a man whose job is making maps. And the addressee knows it. Thus, the word "map" in this instance comes from a shared contextual interpretation that the speaker is a map-maker. Likewise, (9) is uttered at some historic remains. Again

the use of the word "history" in this instance comes from an interpretation of the context which the speaker thinks he shares with the addressee; i.e., that they are both searching through historic remains for treasure.

You may already have noticed the important ways in which metaphors in spoken discourse, or conversational metaphors differ from the irony/reported speech we discussed earlier. In irony/reported speech, the speaker's whole utterance constitutes an interpretive representation of an attributed thought. Remember the case of weather irony, for instance, which I will reproduce here as (10) for convenience.

(10) **Peter:** It's a lovely day for a picnic.
Mary: *(sarcastically)* : It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.

In the sense that Mary echoes the *whole* of Peter's utterance, the interpretation is *propositional.* Conversational metaphors, on the other hand, represent only *part* of the interpreted thought that is attributable to either or both of the participants involved. In (11), for example, the metaphor is based on one of the concepts included in a thought which the speaker derives from his interpretation of the context that he shares with the addressee.

(11) The speaker is a map-maker.
Women are a map. ←

Or the metaphor may be based on a concept which is deducible via an inferential process which Clark (1977) calls "bridging"(8). Consider (12), for instance.

(12) The speaker is a doctor.
(A doctor wears a white gown, uses a stethoscope, syringe, vaccine, etc.)
Fiction is by far the best vaccine against reality. ←

In contrast to the "propositional" representation of irony/reported speech, therefore, conversational metaphors can be said to involve what can be called a *conceptual* representation of an interpreted thought.

3. 2 Interpretive Connectives

Now let us turn our attention from utterances to linking words, or connectives. No doubt they are small linguistic units, but they are no less important than utterances, for they are indispensable to logical composition of discourse, either written or spoken, and keep the discourse from falling apart.

There would be no denying the idea up to this point. But what is always overlooked or even ignored in the linguistic literature is the fact that all connectives are not the same; that they can be used either descriptively or interpretively. Traditional approaches seem to assume that there is only a descriptive aspect to these small phrases. Blakemore (1988), for example, discusses the role of the connective *so* and shows that its function is to make explicit an inferential connection between two propositions(9).

(13) There was $5 in his wallet. *So* he hadn't spent all the money.

(14) Tom ate the condemned meat. *So* he fell ill.

According to Blakemore, a hearer is expected to establish an inferential connection between the two propositions presented. In (13), the hearer is to find that the second proposition is a *logical* consequence of the state of affairs described by the first. In (14), on the other hand, he is to find that the second part is a *causal* consequence of the event represented by the first. Regardless of the kind of inferential connection whose existence is made explicit by the use of *so*, what is relevant to our discussion here is the fact that the two propositions are used *descriptively* in both of these cases ; i.e., they all describe a certain state of affairs which the speaker thinks holds true.

There is, however, a group of connectives that are basically used *interpretively.* Now let us consider (15).

(15) Putting fluoride into water has only a temporary effect on children's health. It's a flash in the pan. *In other words,* it's papering over the cracks(10).

Here, the speaker is claiming that the benefit of fluoridated water on children's (dental) health is equal to the effect of covering cracks with paper. In this way, *in other words* is used to propose another way of saying or viewing what has just been said. To put it differently, it

serves as a sign that indicates that the speaker interprets his own utterance (hence, his thought) into what he thinks is a contextual equivalent of the idea proposed. I would like to call this type of sign an *interpretive connective*.

Note that if a pair of thoughts connected by *in other words* are totally identical in form, or one is just a logical entailment of the other, simple repetition of practically the same idea would end up being a waste of time and effort on both sides of the verbal interaction. Therefore, an interpretation offered must not only be contextually equivalent to but also more informative than the original thought. As long as it serves as a clarification of the speaker's communicative intention, therefore, it may be offered either as a summary of the foregoing argument or even as a message rather unexpected from but reasonably implied by the preceding utterance(s), as in (16).

(16) Four hours before the fashion show was scheduled to begin, everything was falling apart.

Catastrophe: John Fairchild of W was unexpectedly going to be in Paris, and there was no seat for him.

Tragedy: the speaker system was not working.

Disaster: one of the top models was ill.

Emergency: two of the make-up artists were fighting backstage and were far behind schedule.

Calamity: all the seams on the cigarette skirts were tearing.

In other words, Kendall thought wryly, everything is normal. (S. Sheldon: *Morning, Noon & Night*)

A normal interpretation of this series of tragic events would not lead one to conclude that everything is normal. The use of *in other words*, however, helps the audience identify this common-sensically conflicting combination of the states of affairs as probable or even reasonable in this situation, i.e., with respect to Kendall. It also helps the hearer recover an added implicature that the woman has lived through lots of such situations.

Notice that a connective like *in other words* is a rather special case of interpretive use in two ways. First, it only *introduces* rather than constitutes an interpretation of a previous thought. Second, the idea it introduces is to be attributed to the speaker himself, not to someone else or people in general. These aspects are what distinguishes the use of *in other words* from other interpretive phenomena such as irony,

reported speech, or conversational metaphors, as discussed in the previous sections.

Also it is important to note that an interpretation can be a reflection of only a *part* of the idea proposed. Let us consider (17) and (18).

(17) You will admit, Mr. Holmes, that there is a possibility that these initials are those of the second person who was present--*in other words*, of the murderer. (A. C. Doyle: *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*)

(18) "And how could you tell that they would make their attempt tonight?" I asked.
"Well, when they closed their League offices that was a sign that they cared no longer about Mr. Jabez Wilson's presence--*in other words*, that they had completed their tunnel. (A. C. Doyle: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*)

In both of these cases, what follows *in other words* is a contextual paraphrase of part of the speaker's own utterance: one is a phrasal paraphrase and the other a clausal paraphrase of the preceding utterance. In both cases, the speaker presents the second piece of information as more informative than the first in the given context. In (17), for example, the speaker reassesses his use of the phrase "the second person who was present" and he *reinterprets* it into another concept "the murderer", which he thinks is more relevant in the context that he shares with the addressee.

Thus, *in other words* serves as a sign that either a propositional or a conceptual representation of a thought attributable to the speaker himself will come after it. The same is true, I believe, with such connectives as *that is*, or *I mean*. Anyway, this two-way representation just parallels the distinction I have made in the preceding sections between irony/reported speech, on the one hand, and conversational metaphors, on the other, providing further evidence that interpretive use of language is a rather common occurrence in communication.

4 Conclusion

I have presented some evidence to suggest that there are what we can call *interpretive phenomena* in verbal communication. As Sperber and Wilson (1986) have already made clear, they all involve an interpretation of an attributed thought, that is, a thought which can be

attributed to someone else[11]. But our present discussion has revealed that this idea of *attributed thought* has to be refined further if we are to explain a wider range of linguistic phenomena than were originally envisaged by Sperber and Wilson. See Figure 1 for details.

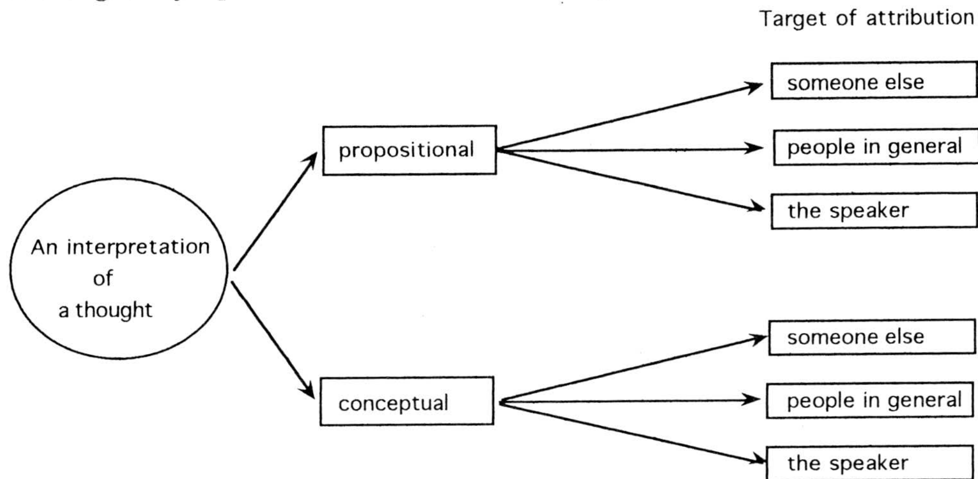

Figure 1

First, a thought must be attributed to people in general as we saw in the case of popular wisdom. Second, it also needs to be attributed to a speaker himself if we are to deal with some expressions marked by a certain class of connectives like *in other words*. Furthermore, an interpretation involved must be either *propositional*, as in irony and reported speech, or *conceptual*, as in conversational metaphors and some of the expressions accompanied by *in other words*.

When we think of communication in general, we tend to focus our attention on the descriptive side of language use, for it is usually in this domain that we present or obtain new pieces of information. By contrast, the interpretive side of language use, whose function is basically echoic in nature, appears to bring us less or even no information at all[12]. However, as is clear from the discussion, any expression used interpretively helps its speaker establish enough coherence in discourse to keep it going. It does so either by referring back to the previous context for a possible interpretation, or by expressing a certain attitude of the speaker towards an utterance produced by someone else. Quite roughly, the descriptive use of language makes its contribution in terms of increasing "reward", while the interpretive use of language in terms of decreasing "cost". It is only when these two aspects of language use achieve their balance does a successful communication result.

Notes

(1) Sperber and Wilson (1986:227).
(2) Yamamoto (1997).
(3) Sperber and Wilson (1986:227-229).
(4) Sperber and Wilson (1986:229).
(5) Sperber and Wilson (1986:239). For a detailed analysis of irony, also see Sperber and Wilson (1981).
(6) Examples (7) - (9) are taken from screenplays.
(7) Sperber and Wilson (1986:123-132). For a brief explanation of these terms, see Blakemore (1988:35-36).
(8) What is involved in (12) is a part-whole relationship between "vaccine" and "doctor". In fact, "vaccine" as well as "white gown", "stethoscope", "syringe" etc. are all inducible from "doctor". See Clark (1977:414-419) for details.
(9) Blakemore (1988:184-5).
(10) Ball (1986: 64).
(11) For a detailed discussion of the two dimensions of language use, see Sperber and Wilson (1986:224-254) and Wilson and Sperber (1988).
(12) For a discussion of an echoic nature of a certain class of utterances including irony, see Sperber and Wilson (1986).

References

Ball, W. J. (1986) *Dictionary of Link Words in English Discourse*, London: Macmillan.

Blakemore, D. (1988) "'So' as a constraint on relevance," in Kempson, R. M. (ed.), *Mental Representations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 183-95.

Clark, H. H. (1977) "Bridging," in Johnson-Laird, P. N. and P.C. Wason (eds.), *Thinking*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 411-20.

Sperber, D. and D. Wilson (1986) "Irony and use-mention distinction," in Cole, P. (ed.) *Radical Pragmatics*, New York: Academic Press, 295-318.

Sperber, D. and D. Wilson (1986) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wilson, D. and D. Sperber (1988) "Representation and relevance," in Kempson, R. M. (ed.), *Mental Representations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133-53.

Yamamoto, E. (1997) "On conversational metaphor -- an interpretive aspect of language use" in *English Usage and Style*, Vol. 14, 94-103.