Critical Pragmatics develops three ideas: language is a way of doing things with words; meanings of phrases and contents of utterances derive ultimately from human intentions; and language combines with other factors to allow humans to achieve communicative goals. In this book, Kepa Korta and John Perry explain why critical pragmatics provides a coherent picture of how parts of language study fit together within the broader picture of human thought and action. They focus on issues about singular reference, that is, talk about particular things, places, or people, which have played a central role in the philosophy of language for more than a century. They argue that attention to the ‘reflexive’ or ‘utterance-bound’ contents of utterances shed new light on these old problems. Their important study proposes a new approach to pragmatics and should be of wide interest to philosophers of language and linguists.

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Critical Pragmatics

An Inquiry into Reference and Communication

Kepa Korta and John Perry
For our beloved siblings
Mikel Korta
Susan Perry
Contents

Preface xi
Acknowledgments xiii

1 Introduction 1
1.1 A conversation at Hondarribia airport 1
1.2 Three ideas 3
1.3 The anatomy of an utterance 8
1.4 Singular reference 12
1.5 The plan 14

2 A short history of reference 15
2.1 Introduction 15
2.2 One hundred-plus years of reference 15
2.3 The problem of cognitive significance 21
2.4 From Kaplan to utterances 22

3 Acts, roles, and singular reference 25
3.1 Introduction 25
3.2 Acts and actions 25
3.3 Roles 28
3.4 Signs and information 30
3.5 Gricean reference 31

4 Elements of reference 37
4.1 Introduction 37
4.2 Cognition and information: an analogy 37
4.3 A modest theory of ideas 38
4.4 Paradigm referential plans 40
4.5 Examples 43

5 Demonstratives 46
5.1 Introduction 46
5.2 The professor and the portrait 47
5.3 Forensics 48
5.4 Walking through Donostia 51
5.5 Truth-conditions 53
5.6 Demonstratives and the problems of cognitive significance 55
viii  Contents

6  Context sensitivity and indexicals  59
   6.1  Role-contexts  59
   6.2  Indexicals  60
   6.3  Using ‘I’  63
   6.4  Indexicals, dates, and time  69
   6.5  Technology and indexicals  71

7  Names  74
   7.1  Introduction  74
   7.2  Names and ambiguity  74
   7.3  Networks and reference  76
   7.4  Names and roles  82
   7.5  Names as role-coordination devices: examples  83
   7.6  Names and cognitive significance  85
   7.7  The no-reference problem  88

8  Definite descriptions  90
   8.1  Introduction  90
   8.2  Incomplete descriptions  92
   8.3  Designational truth-conditions and referring*  94
   8.4  Inaccurate descriptions  96
   8.5  Conclusion  100

9  Implicit reference and unarticulated constituents  102
   9.1  Introduction  102
   9.2  Unarticulated constituents and the supplemental nature of language  102
   9.3  Three kinds of unarticulated constituents  104
   9.4  Whence unarticulated constituents?  109
   9.5  Are unarticulated constituents a myth?  111

10  Locutionary content and speech acts  114
    10.1  Introduction  114
    10.2  Locutionary content versus what is said  114
    10.3  Locutionary acts and locutionary content  116
    10.4  Locuted but not said: some examples  118
    10.5  Locutionary versus propositional content  120
    10.6  Conclusion  124

11  Reference and implicature  125
    11.1  Introduction  125
    11.2  Grice and what is said  126
    11.3  Eros’ thirst  128
    11.4  Identity, implicature, and cognitive significance  130
    11.5  The man who has run out of petrol  132
    11.6  The maxim of manner of reference  134
    11.7  Conclusion  138

12  Semantics, pragmatics, and Critical Pragmatics  139
    12.1  Introduction  139
    12.2  Situating semantics  140
Contents

12.3 Semantic content, raw and refined 142
12.4 Minimalism, contextualism, and Critical Pragmatics 143
12.5 Grice’s circle 147

13 Harnessing information 150
13.1 Introduction 150
13.2 Content 150
13.3 Propositions and the structure of action 158
13.4 Coding and classification 160
13.5 Back to Hondarribia 163

14 Examples 166

Bibliography 170
Index 175
Preface

How do a professor of philosophy from Stanford and Riverside universities in California and a senior lecturer from the University of the Basque Country at Donostia (San Sebastian) end up writing a book on the pragmatics of reference together?

The connection between Stanford and Donostia started through an encounter of two members of, at the moment, a tiny set of people: the set of Basque (including Basque-American) logicians. In the 1980s, Jesus Mari Larrazabal and John Etchemendy met at a logic colloquium in England and a friendship was born; a friendship that caused an interesting exchange: various logicians and philosophers – mostly young researchers during their PhD studies, including Korta – had the opportunity to visit the philosophy department and the Center for the Study of Language and Information (CSLI) at Stanford during the 1990s. Several logicians, computer scientists, psychologists, and philosophers – including Perry – took part in workshops and conferences in Donostia in more or less the same period. The research atmosphere of Stanford and, especially, the interdisciplinary approach of CSLI inspired the most determined people in Donostia to create the Institute for Logic, Cognition, Language and Information (ILCLI). In 2002, proposed by the Institute, the University of the Basque Country conferred on Perry the honorary degree of Doctor Honoris Causa.

In 2001, CSLI had not much space available, so Perry was kind enough that summer to share his office with Korta, who at the time was working on the semantics/pragmatics divide and the pragmatically determined elements of what is said – along with some boring stuff for a promotion that never happened. John handed a copy, still warm, of the first edition of Reference and Reflexivity to Kepa. It was not only less boring but also very relevant to many phenomena at the border of semantics and pragmatics, or that’s what Kepa thought. We didn’t talk seriously about it until later that year, when we met again at the semantics, pragmatics, and rhetoric workshop (SPR-01) in Donostia.

There, listening to some of the best specialists in semantic and pragmatics, we convinced ourselves that something was missing in the received framework of pragmatics. The picture of language as action wasn’t fully accepted and exploited for the analysis of the role that conventions, the minds of the
speaker-hearers, and the conversational situation play in linguistic communication. We thought some of the ideas from Reference and Reflexivity would allow us to make something between a major repair and a minor revolution in the foundations of pragmatics.

We met several times to think, read, and write about pragmatics both in California and the Basque Country, but it was thanks to the Diamond XX Philosophy Institute (that is, Perry’s doublewide trailer in the Sierra foothills) that we were able to spend August of 2004 together and write our first paper: ‘Three Demonstrations and a Funeral.’ In that article early versions of many of the ideas developed in this book and in our other articles can be found. Although Austin’s and Grice’s pragmatics caused the fall of the code model of communication, stressing the basic idea that language is action and that our intentions and beliefs are critical for the right account, we remained convinced that pragmatic theories were not adequately grounded in a theory of action. Just to give an example, while in action theory it is common to distinguish a plurality of contents for an act – that is, things that are done – depending on several factors that can be taken as given, in pragmatics utterances were still considered by most authors to have a single truth-conditional content – thing that is said. We saw this ‘mono-propositionalism’ as a remnant of the code model, that would be naturally overcome in our approach to utterances as intentional acts with an interlocking structure of planned results.

With the publication of Recanati’s Literal Meaning [Recanati, 2004] and Cappelen and Lepore’s Insensitive Semantics [Cappelen and Lepore, 2005] the debate between minimalists and contextualists arrived at its height, and like many others we felt obliged to define our view in this framework.1 In our approach, a level of content with no pragmatic ‘intrusion’ came naturally as the minimal utterance-bound content of the utterance. This wouldn’t correspond to what is said, but it’s truth-conditionally complete and apt as the ‘input’ for pragmatic reasoning, giving a natural way to get out of a vicious circle that threatens Gricean pragmatics theories and which Levinson (2000) dubbed ‘Grice’s circle.’

We thought that our ideas on pragmatics could also allow us to shed new light on a classic topic that has occupied philosophers of language for a hundred-plus years: the nature of singular reference. By studying the pragmatics of reference, old issues could be seen in new ways. Hence the ideas for this book were worked out.

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1 See [Korta and Perry, 2007b,c] in which we see ourselves as both minimalists in semantics, certainly more radical than Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and even Borg (2004), and as moderate contextualists in pragmatics. Other positions include ‘indexicalism’ [Stanley, 2000] and ‘situationalism’ [Corazza and Dokic, 2007]; the latter seems closer to our view.
Acknowledgments

After writing this book, and using ‘I’ in many of our examples, we have some difficulty in telling our own individual thoughts about the issues apart. Something similar happens with our acknowledgments. We share most of our friends and colleagues, and workplaces such as the Diamond XX Philosophy Institute, so we share our feelings of gratitude to the members of the Pragmatics Project at CSLI and the Language and Communication Seminar at ILCLI, including Xabier Arrazola, Eros Corazza, Joana Garmendia, Jesus Mari Larrazabal, María Ponte, and Larraitz Zubeldia. We are also thankful to the students of our graduate seminar on the philosophy of language at Stanford in 2009. Perry’s discussions with Robin Jeshion and their students in a pragmatics seminar at the University of California at Riverside were very helpful, and special thanks are due to Megan Stotts from that seminar, who gave us detailed comments on an earlier draft of this book. Our friends Jérôme Dokic and Stefano Predelli also gave us very helpful comments.

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