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Robyn Carston

REVIEWS

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We are told at the beginning of this book that using language is like
dancing a waltz, playing a piano duet or making love, in that they are all
kinds of joint action. The key word in this book is, without doubt, 'joint';
it occurs in at least the following phrases, all of which have an important role
to play in the account: joint activities, joint actions, joint acts, joint events,
joint closure, joint construals, joint projects, joint effort, joint commitments,
joint focus of attention, joint perceptual experience, joint salience, joint
knowledge, joint management, joint purpose, joint pretense, joint solutions.

This central thesis that 'language use is a form of joint action' might strike
many linguists as simply wrong. For instance, some might think that
language is used in thinking, which is surely not a JOINT action, in fact not
usefully thought of as an ACTION of any sort; then there is talking aloud when
alone, which one may do for a variety of reasons: to rehearse a speech, to see
whether something one has written really does express the intended ideas, to
divert oneself from tormenting thoughts, to enjoy the sounds of a poem, for
the sheer delight of belting out the words of 'Oh come all ye faithful' while
in the shower, etc. For those who construe 'language use' as encompassing
these possibilities, the title of the book is misleading: 'language' here does
not entail something that has such linguistic properties as phonology,
morphology and syntax, because it includes non-linguistic gestures such as
pointing, nodding, eye-gaze, and certain types of smiling, frowning and other
facial and bodily movements, and the 'use' at issue is entirely communicative.
Face-to-face conversation is taken to be the basic type (so it is the primary
focus of the book), and all other communicative uses of linguistic entities
(like letter-writing, story-telling, interviewing, organised discussion, etc.) are
taken to be secondary and derivative. What the book is really about is what
Clark calls 'signaling' (and others call 'ostensive communication'); that does
indeed include many non-linguistic behaviours and exclude many (non-
communicative) employments of linguistic forms.

This volume is the culmination of over a decade of work by Clark and his
colleagues, in which the view of language use as a joint action embedded
within broader social activities has become more and more the central focus.
To establish this, Clark deploys an interesting conjunction of scholars and
disciplines, welding the philosophical views of Lewis and Austin to the
empirical inductive observations of conversation analysts, such as Sacks,

Schegloff and Jefferson, and to the work of J. B. Bavelas (probably unfamiliar to most linguists) on ostensive gestures, or what she calls 'nonverbal linguistic acts', a concept that is clearly reflected in Clark's account of 'language' use. Ideas from the field of pragmatics, a concept that for many is instantly activated by talk of 'language use', has a very meagre presence: the work of Sperber & Wilson and other relevance theorists, of Bach & Harnish, Larry Horn, and Georgia Green is essentially passed over, and Levinson enters the scene only in his most social and least linguistic manifestations. Inadequate and misguided approaches to language use are characterised by Clark as having most or all of the following properties: they concentrate on the PRODUCTS of language use rather than on what people do with language, they have grown out of the generative grammar tradition, they ignore the central role played by non-linguistic elements of signals, they give insufficient attention and weight to the crucial concept of context, the speaker's meaning (communicative intention) is given an inappropriate primacy over, and autonomy from, the hearer's recognition of it and the collaborative processes of speaker and hearer. Whether or not this characterisation does pick out an approach to language use (Clark names no names), the listed deficiencies provide a useful way of highlighting the properties of his own account, which are in clear contrast to them.

The view of language and communication adopted in the book is pure David Lewis; the key concepts are 'coordination problem', 'convention' and 'common ground'. The goal of language use (= signaling) is an increase in the interlocutors' common ground, but to achieve this they have to solve a participant coordination problem (that is, reach a joint construal of the signal), and one of the most important devices for achieving the required coordination is that of convention. As well as conventions of use (e.g. different types of greeting in different cultures) and conventions of perspective (e.g. the difference between 'first floor' as used in Britain and in North America), the lexical entries and grammatical rules that make up a linguistic system are conventions. The following gives the flavour: 'As Lewis argued, the phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic rules of a language – its grammar – constitute a conventional signaling system. They describe regularities of behavior – what English speakers regularly do, and expect others to do, to achieve part of what they intend to do in using sounds, words, constructions, and sentences for communication' (77).

In understanding an utterance, these (and other, nonlinguistic) con-ventional devices interact with nonconventional coordination devices, which include perceptual salience (of objects in the physical context, for instance), explicit agreement (on how a term is to be used, for instance), precedence (in referring to something in a certain way, for instance), the ultimate criterion for their use being joint salience. The factors which necessitate this interaction of the conventional and the nonconventional include ambiguity, indexicality, novel uses of words and structures, and what Clark calls layering, which

arises in various 'nonserious' uses of language, including fictions, tropes like hyperbole and irony, teasing and ostensible communicative acts (e.g. pretend invitations). In short, it is those factors which are generally considered to comprise the domain of pragmatic theory. There is, however, no pragmatic criterion at work in this picture of comprehension; Grice's maxims and other communicative principles, characterised as reductions of Grice's system, such as Sperber & Wilson's Principle of Relevance, are dismissed as misguided. Elements of Grice's Cooperative Principle are taken up and recast in terms of the joint purpose of conversationalists, and the various joint actions they engage in in arriving at a joint construal of a given signal. Among the various coordination devices involved in achieving this, a crucial role is played by a range of metacommunicative acts, in what can be thought of as track 2, parallel with the communicative acts in track 1. The function of these metacommunicative acts, which include acknowledgments like "uh huh", "yeah" or a nod, is to establish the mutual belief that signals have been understood well enough for current purposes (that is, to bring about joint closure on the joint actions in the communicative track).

Signaling is an act by which one person means something for another. While signaling encompasses the Gricean concept of speaker meaning as involving a complex (reflexive) intention on the part of the speaker, one of Clark's central contentions is that it should not be viewed in the listener-free sort of way that Grice, Searle and others adopt. Rather, it is to be seen as typically a joint act located, together with other joint acts, within a broader joint activity such as two people hanging curtains together, planning a holiday with a friend, a buying-selling transaction, a car-driving/road-navigating interaction, or such intrinsically communicative activities as discussing the latest news, having a gossip or making conversation at a party. Signals (including linguistic ones) are devices for coordinating actions at various stages of these activities; they provide a shared basis for adding to common ground some information which will further the current goals of the participants. On this construal, signaling involves both the speaker's meaning intention and the 'discharge' (or fulfilment) of that intention through the hearer's recognition of it. In fact, any signaling act involves a ladder of four levels of (cotemporal) joint action, which are in an upwards causal relation: (a) the joint action of the articulatory/gesticulatory behaviour of the signaler paired with its perception by the addressee; (b) the joint action of presentation of a particular signal (e.g. a linguistic expression and/or a bodily gesture) and its identification by the addressee; (c) the signaling that p and the addressee's recognition that p is what is meant (an action which must ultimately issue in a joint construal of the signal's meaning); (d) the proposal of a joint project and the addressee's consideration of the proposal (followed, in most instances, by uptake). Minimal joint projects (manifest in Schegloffian 'adjacency pairs') include the following: greeting reciprocation, the transfer of information (manifest in an answer to a question), instigating

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a behaviour (manifest in, for instance, an addressee sitting down when requested/advised/ordered/invited to do so), settling on a view (manifest in an addressee assenting to a speaker's assertion). This fourth level, which goes beyond the concerns of most pragmatic theories (which focus on level 3), is crucial on Clark's view, because it provides the rationale for signaling, which is to further the joint activities people are engaged in at the time and to advance the common ground of the social group, thereby increasing the possibilities for subsequent joint activities.

Most signals are the result of a fusion of three methods of signaling: 'describing-as', 'indicating' and 'demonstrating', which respectively employ the symbolic (linguistic expressions being the paradigm case), the indexical (e.g. pointing) and the iconic (e.g. manual, facial and/or vocal gestures, including intonation). Here's a simple example: 'George sees Helen and says "Hello." He uses his voice and eye gaze to *indicate* himself as speaker, Helen as addressee, and now as the time of greeting. He uses his smile, open eyes, and magnified intonation to *demonstrate* his enthusiasm. Helen, in turn, not only interprets each of these methods, but integrates them to understand him as meaning, roughly, "I, George, now greet you, Helen, enthusiastically". The point is this: "Hello" is treated not as three PARALLEL signals with separate interpretations, but as a SINGLE signal with a unified interpretation' (185).

It is through this discussion of the composite nature of signals that Clark is led to his revision of the concept of 'language' as *language$_u$* (that is, language in use), to be distinguished from *language$_s$* (that is, language structure), language$_s$ providing but one of the entwined strands of a signal. Language$_u$ encompasses all manifestations of communicative (and meta-communicative) intent, including, for instance, the displacement of tokens on a board by the players in a game of chess. Two questions arise for me, the first one rhetorical: (1) Why use the word 'language' here at all, when it is signaling which is the subject? (2) Is it clear that to study the use of language$_s$ is as deeply mistaken an endeavour as Clark would have it? To do so would, of course, be to abstract away from the full complexity of communicative performances at a different point from Clark, carving out a narrower domain, but one which might enable a deeper dig, looking at (some of) the mechanisms that underlie and enable signaling behaviour. Interestingly, he himself points out that his three signaling methods, of which the linguistic is one, involve different cognitive resources: a mental lexicon and grammatical rules for describing-as, a mental representation of current spatio-temporal surroundings for indicating, and memory for appearances for demonstrating (184). This is, however, the only explicit mention of cognitive capacities and systems in the book.

The reservations I've indicated notwithstanding, the meticulous and inexorable way in which Clark builds his account, brick by brick, is very impressive and the final, tightly interlocking structure coheres in a satisfying

way. Each of his many 'principles' is supported by a wealth of detailed discussion and illustrative examples; the examples are authentic, taken from, among others, the London-Lund corpus, and annotated to indicate such features of speech as tone unit, pauses and overlapping utterance. He uses apt literary quotes and amusing anecdotes to engage the reader. Several of the chapters in which he presents existing views are interesting and useful independent of their role in furthering his project. For instance, the chapter on that tricky notion of 'common ground', a notion that seems inevitably to arise in some form or other in any serious model of human communication, sets out three different conceptions of common ground: Lewis's original 'shared basis' view (which he adopts), the reflexive definition and the iterated propositions representation that emerges from it. Clark's discussion of the psychological plausibility (possibility even) of these conceptions is judicious. Similarly, his summaries of Austin (whom he considers a forebear of his 'language as social (hence joint) action' view), of Grice and of Searle (of whom he is more critical – for what he sees as their autonomous speaker orientation) and of Peirce on symbols, indices and icons, are excellent, clear and succinct introductions to these people's ideas.

In reading this book I participated in a joint action with Herb Clark in which I struggled to coordinate with him; our initial common ground was somewhat sparse, apparently not even containing a meaning for the word *language*; I am not sure that we have reached a joint construal, though we have expended a deal of joint effort. I am sure, however, that I gained a good range of cognitive effects, and that all other readers will too.

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(Received 26 February 1998)