



Introduction: A Critical Eye on Critical Pragmatics

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“/ninaizdjon/”
(Critical Pragmatics, p. 1.)

John, a philosopher—with no known surname—arrives at Hondarribia airport. He is awaiting the arrival of two local students—Joana and Larraitz—who have agreed to take him to a pragmatics conference in Donostia. They approach him and John tries to introduce himself in Basque by saying “/ninaizdjon/”—a literal, yet awkward, translation of the English *I am John*. Larraitz correctly interprets John as attempting to introduce himself. However, given John’s poor accent, awkward phrasing (John should have said: “Ni John naiz”), and the fact that Joana knows that John is fond of both identity statements and making jokes, she mistakenly believes John to have uttered the English identity statement: “Nina is John”.

Joana is puzzled about what John could be saying. She expects he is referring to himself with his use of ‘John’. But then to whom is he referring with the typically feminine name ‘Nina’? And why is he saying that he is Nina? What is he trying to do? She suspects John is trying to convey something funny connected with identity sentences and what philosophers say about them, but she can’t figure out what this hypothetical joke might be. (Korta and Perry 2011, p. 1).

Both Joana and Larraitz wondered about what John could be saying, and both arrived at very different conclusions. This is the first example introduced in *Critical Pragmatics*,

written by Kepa Korta and John Perry in 2011. It is the book to which this special issue of *Topoi* is dedicated. The exchange we cited above serves to remind us of the fact that communication is anything but straightforward. Its success depends on, among other things, understanding which objects are referred to by indexical expressions (such as “ni” [English=“I”]) and referential expressions like “John” and “Nina”, reasoning about what speakers intend to do by uttering the expressions they do, and in what language they are speaking. Importantly, the example illustrates that it is possible for words and phrases to take on very different meanings in as much as it is possible for different speakers to use the same words and expressions to express different things: various Basque speakers can utter “Ni naiz John” to awkwardly introduce themselves, while different English-speaking philosophers can use this expression to make different (supposedly funny) jokes.

We journey into the realm of pragmatics when we ask how speakers manage to convey more than or go beyond what they literally say. In fact, such considerations paved the way to what we may now call “Classical Pragmatics”, which developed sometime around the mid-sixties by authors like John L. Austin, Paul Grice, and John Searle. Together, their innovative research contributed to identifying failures with and offering solutions to problems concerning the “code model” of communication. According to this model, linguistic communication is a process of coding and decoding information on the basis of established linguistic conventions (semantics). One of the most central, and perhaps most ecumenical tenants of the doctrine of Classical Pragmatics is its shift in focus from bare, lexicalized meaning to patterns of rational behaviour: (linguistic) communication is not simply about attunement to what is meant by the uttered expressions; recognition is also needed of what interlocutors are plausibly taken to be doing and meaning in using the expressions in the way that they use them. Long story short: semantic meaning underdetermines speaker’s meaning. No doubt, pragmatics as a field of research has evolved considerably over the past several decades, and it continues to expand and flourish.

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For example, we have seen the development of neo-Gricean pragmatic theories (Horn 2005, 2006; Levinson 1983), the post-Gricean programme of Relevance Theory (Carston 2002; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2012) and developments in Speech Act Theory (Bach 1994; Bach and Harnish 1979) among many other notable works at, and beyond, the semantics-pragmatics interface.

There is no doubt that pragmatics constitutes a crucial aspect of (the study of linguistic) communication, however, there is little consensus on its precise nature and role. *Critical Pragmatics* establishes an important and novel step in understanding the nature and roles played by the semantic and pragmatic systems and their interface.

The perspective of pragmatics promoted by Korta and Perry rests upon three integral ideas. The first idea takes seriously the Austinian dictum: *Language is action*. They claim, “acts of using language, or utterances, have a basic structure that is an instance of the general structure of actions: an agent, by moving her body and its parts in various ways, in various circumstances, accomplishes things” (p. 3). So, too, do we accomplish things with words.

The second idea refers to *communicative intentions*. Korta and Perry see this idea stemming from Grice: “[his] idea was that the meaning of phrases and contents of utterances derive ultimately from human intentions, and in particular a special sort of intentions, communicative intentions... A communicative intention has its own recognition as one of its goals” (p. 4).

Finally, Korta and Perry adopt the idea of *reflexive versus referential truth-conditions*. This idea comes from Perry (2001).¹ *Critical Pragmatics* rejects the semantic doctrine held by various other pragmaticists: Namely, the “dogma of mono-propositionalism”. This doctrine holds that—implicatures, presuppositions etc. aside—there is one and only one proposition which corresponds to the utterance of a sentence. Korta and Perry adopt and promote the sort of content-pluralism developed by Perry in *Reference and Reflexivity*. Applying this to their pragmatic model allows us to see a given utterance as involving multiple actions. Accordingly, a given utterance is systematically related to a family of contents: some of these contents are *reflexive*, others are *referential*, with various incrementally linked contents in between.

From these three interrelated ideas, Korta and Perry develop a theory of reference that takes the *speaker’s plan* as the basic unit of analysis—since fully understanding the utterance made by the speaker usually involves grasping their communicative plan—where language is a device linguistic animals exploit to disclose their intentions to others (p. 5). As Korta and Perry state, *Critical Pragmatics* is

largely an exploration of the pragmatics of singular reference—which involves the discussion of proper names,² definite descriptions, demonstratives, indexicals, and other sorts of pronouns. Despite this focus, it offers a set of theoretical tools to account for various other linguistic phenomena—i.e. fictional, mythical and other ‘empty’ names,³ slurring⁴ and pejorative speech, modal and epistemic particles,⁵ evidentials,⁶ temporal indexicals,⁷ irony,⁸ and metaphor.⁹ Over the last 12 years, the book and the ideas therein continue to be a driving force in research, inspiring a wide audience working in diverse areas, and has had considerable impact in and on philosophy of language.¹⁰

The idea for the volume arose in a workshop organized on December 2021 by members of the Language Action and Thought (LAT) research group, at the Institute for Logic, Cognition, Language and Information (ILCLI), of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).¹¹ The workshop brought together a number of dedicated philosophers and linguists to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Critical Pragmatics*. The presentations at the conference were lively and provocative, inspiring productive and thoughtful dialogue. In many ways the conference was a testament to the sustained and consistent efforts to critically reflect on chief tenets of Critical Pragmatics and its application to classic and contemporary issues at the semantics/pragmatics interface.

We thought that the workshop offered a great opportunity to correspond with academics working on issues treated in *Critical Pragmatics* and invite them to submit original papers to be considered for publication. This Special Issue of *Topoi*, *A Critical Eye on Critical Pragmatics*, is the result of this idea. The common thread linking the contributions

¹ In fact, it ultimately derives from his work with Jon Barwise on situation semantics (1983).

² See, Corazza: “The Name-Notion Network: On How To Conciliate Two Approaches to Naming and Reference-Fixing”, this volume.

³ On how to use the Critical Pragmatics apparatus for the semantics of mythical names, see Clapp: “Vulcan is a Hot Mess: The Dilemma of Mythical Names and Cococo-Reference”, in this volume. See also Orlando’s “*Critical Pragmatics* on Fictional Names. Some Problems Concerning Network Content”, also in this volume, where she claims to be a bit skeptical on the prospects for offering a semantics for fictional names appealing to the notion of network content.

⁴ See Vallée (2014).

⁵ See Clapp and Lavallo Terrón (2018).

⁶ See Korta and Zubeldia (2014).

⁷ See de Ponte and Korta (2020).

⁸ See Garmendia (2015).

⁹ See Genovesi: “A Critical Pragmatic Account of Prosaic and Poetic Metaphors”, this volume.

¹⁰ Themes developed in *Critical Pragmatics* have been critically discussed, for example, by Friend (2014), Rosenthal (2014), and Everett (2013).

¹¹ Workshop website: <https://latgroup.wixsite.com/home/critical-pragmatics-ten-years>.

together is the critical examination of Critical Pragmatics. Contributions include not only novel applications and developments of the theory, but critical and conflicting points of view, and evaluations of the success of its application to various issues in pragmatics.

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The Special Issue opens with María de Ponte, Kepa Korta and John Perry's "*Critical Pragmatics: Nine Misconceptions*". The authors clarify nine common misconceptions surrounding the ideas about (and around) Critical Pragmatics. Some of those misconceptions are substantial misinterpretations of the apparatus developed in *Critical Pragmatics*, others are just repetitive or 'annoying'—as the authors claim. Some of the misconceptions have a long history, since they stem from misunderstanding the very positions put forward by Perry in the seventies; others are newer and are directly related to particular features of Critical Pragmatics.

For example, de Ponte, Korta and Perry state that there are some misconceptions that have arisen due to the very name of the book and the philosophical position they defend, namely, 'Critical Pragmatics'. Some have erroneously identified Korta's and Perry's position as an extension of Critical Pragmatism (it isn't), or with approaches outside of philosophy that don't have much to do with the "critical" approach they propose towards pragmatics (understood as a level of semiotics). Many other misconceptions are related to the authors' rejection of the "doctrine of propositions"; sometimes it is misunderstood how terms like "proposition", "content" and "truth-conditions" are used by Critical Pragmatics when talking about our intentional mental states—more concretely, many misconceptions arise from overlooking the fact that the authors reject the idea that intentional mental states "consist in" some relation to a proposition. That is why, among other things, they dislike the label "multi-propositionalism" to characterize their position. Other misunderstandings concern the levels of content they distinguish in Critical Pragmatics (e.g., sometimes scholars mistakenly equate Critical Pragmatics with two-dimensionalism), or the alleged "metalinguistic" nature of the reflexive contents.

The second and third articles of the Special Issue concern fictional, mythical, and other "empty" names. Eleonora Orlando's "*Critical Pragmatics on Fictional Names. Some Problems Concerning Network Content*" explores the prospects of the *network content*, a level of content introduced by Korta and Perry in the multi-layered view of content they defend in *Critical Pragmatics*. Network content is a level of content identified within the Critical Pragmatic framework for sentences containing singular terms; this content is defined by appealing to a vast network of utterances and notions supporting such utterances. Given that sentences containing 'empty' names lack a referential content, Korta and Perry argue that the network contents capture the role

that those 'names' play in communicative plans negotiated between speakers.

Orlando is a bit skeptical of the explanation outlined by Korta and Perry—she introduces a couple of worries for such an account of fictional names. First, she argues that some aspects of the semantic account of fictional names in terms of network content are unclear; for instance, she mentions that it is far from clear what kind of "network competence" we should suppose competent speakers have if they are to apprehend the network content of sentences containing fictional names. On the other hand, she argues that, even though it is somewhat clear what kind of network content can be proposed for mythical and other non-referring names like "Jupiter" or "Vulcan", the same thing seems to be a bit more complicated when it comes to explaining the semantics of fictional names like "Holmes". Her main claim is that fictional names cannot be assimilated to other sorts of proper names and that, therefore, the content-apparatus developed in *Critical Pragmatics* for dealing with such referring names may have a problem with nonreferring fictional names.

Lenny Clapp's article "*Vulcan is a Hot Mess: The Dilemma of Mythical Names and Cococo-Reference*" exploits Korta and Perry's notion of coco-reference to convincingly deal with mythical names such as "Vulcan", and explains how they differ from fictional names. The main aim of the paper is to develop a notion of (coco)co-reference of mythical names, like "Vulcan", which differs in significant ways from instances of what Korta and Perry refer to as coco-reference. In cases involving the use of mythical names, the relationship between the relevant utterances is of a more complicated variant than coco-reference. Although the author presents these cases to show that they pose a dilemma for advocates of Critical Pragmatics, Clapp understands his task not so much as addressing a problem for the account so much as amending and extending it to provide an explanation of phenomena in want of clarification.

The chief aim of the paper is thus to provide a Critical Pragmatic explanation of how coco-reference may be extended to account for these different cases. In fact, Clapp proposes and develops an account of cococo-reference to account for the problems mythical names pose to theories of reference. That is to say, our uses of names such as "Vulcan" are *conversely conditionally co-referential* whereby we intend that our uses refer to a mythical entity created by Le Verrier's false theorizing "only on the condition that Le Verrier's uses *fail to refer*" (Clapp, in this volume). If this latter condition is not satisfied, then our uses of "Vulcan" co-refer with Le Verrier's.

Chris Genovesi's "*A Critical Pragmatic Account of Prosaic and Poetic Metaphors*" offers a novel and interesting perspective on metaphor interpretation. Specifically, Genovesi extends Korta's and Perry's framework in *Critical Pragmatics* to account for interpretations across the

poetic-prosaic spectrum of metaphorical uses of speech. Genovesi traverses the debate in metaphor research between standard pragmatic accounts—most notably identified with the Gricean account of conversational implicatures—and accounts developed by Relevance Theory and their contextualist allies. The former model profiles metaphor as a pragmatic phenomenon; the latter has it as a semantic one.

The motivation for the article rests on the observation that metaphors vary in terms of how stable their meaning is across various contexts. Metaphors exist on a spectrum between poetic and novel metaphors occupying one extreme, with highly prosaic, conventional and dead metaphors at the other end. The conundrum for the philosopher of language is that under observation, highly poetic metaphors have many of the hallmarks of standard conversational implicatures—where speakers say one thing and mean something else. Prosaic metaphors, on the other hand, seem to be closer to cases of literally loose uses of speech (e.g., “France is hexagonal”) where audiences unreflectively interpret the speaker’s intended meaning as what s/he said. Genovesi’s main claim is that neither the Gricean nor the contextualist account can capture the range of metaphors. Genovesi exploits the reflexive-referential apparatus in *Critical Pragmatics* to capture the pragmatic logic of metaphor interpretation across the prosaic-poetic spectrum. The upshot of this approach, he claims, is that one need not choose between a semantic or pragmatic profile of metaphor; rather, a metaphorical interpretation can be triggered by various levels of content that arise by “considerations of and inferences from the various pieces of information that are made available” within the context of utterance (Genovesi, this volume).

The Special Issue closes with Eros Corazza’s “The Name-Notion Network: On How to Conciliate Two Approaches to Naming and Reference-Fixing”. Corazza applies the theoretical framework developed by *Critical Pragmatics* in order to deal with a well-established historical debate concerning the interpretation of the works of Keith Donnellan and Saul Kripke. There has been much debate during the last decade on how we should interpret some claims made by Donnellan on naming and reference-fixing and, particularly, on how they differ from some proposals made by Kripke. Donnellan maintained that, when fixing the referent of a token use of a proper name, the object the speaker has in mind takes priority. Kripke, on the other hand, favored a picture according to which some causal and communicative chains determined the referent of a given proper name. Hence, according to Corazza, there seems to be some sort of tension between the two approaches, and a dilemma arises: we seem to be compelled to choose between a “psychologically driven” account of reference (Donnellan) and a “socially driven” account (Kripke).

Then, again, Corazza makes use of the theoretical approach developed in *Critical Pragmatics* in order to solve

this tension since, according to him, the *Critical Pragmatics* apparatus can be seen as a hybrid of those two positions. In *Critical Pragmatics*, Korta and Perry distinguish between different levels of content of an utterance; when a sentence contains a proper name, they appeal to what they call “the name-notion network”. Corazza’s point is that the name-network and the notion-network usually go hand in hand, but that in some particular cases discrepancies between the two networks arise: those are the examples in which there seems to be a tension between a Kripkean approach to reference and a Donnellan-inspired one. Once those two networks are distinguished, we may use them to identify different levels of content and, with that, two different interpretations of the problematic examples, one in accordance with the “socially driven” and Kripke-inspired view, and the other one more in accordance with the “psychologically driven” and Donnellan inspired view.

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