

Book review

Critical pragmatics. An inquiry into reference and communication

Kepa Korta, John Perry, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 178 pp., ISBN: 9780521748674, EUR 21.95 (paperback)



Critical Pragmatics is an ambitious book in the philosophy of language and the foundations of semantics and pragmatics. It covers a vast number of topics with a surprising amount of detail and in a very engaging way. Some of the arguments were already present in Korta and Perry's previous publications and all of them more or less directly spring from that joint research (see for instance [Korta and Perry, 2006a,b, 2007a,b](#)). However, this is a self contained book, where the authors present us with a brand new and highly original theory, with important additions to their earlier theses, careful and detailed arguments and, mostly, with well developed and challenging new ideas.

In a sense, this is not a standard philosophy book. Despite its depth, it is very readable and one of the first things that gets the reader's attention is the abundance of examples which, in most cases, are not used merely to illustrate or clarify a point but rather to make it. The technical aspects are presented in a clear and straightforward manner, including numerous nods to the reader. This might be a problem for some readers, particularly those accustomed to long and intricate philosophical discussions, but I personally find it refreshing.

Right at the start, the authors define Critical Pragmatics ("Critical Pragmatics" is not only the main title of the book but also the name of the theory presented. From now on, I will use italics when referring to the book and roman when referring to the theory) as the result of combining three ideas: language as a mode of action, which they take from Austin; communicative intentions, the Gricean idea that "connects language as action to language as possessor of content" (p. 4); and the distinction between reflexive and referential truth conditions introduced by [Perry \(2001\)](#). According to this last idea, utterances (and other information-carrying events) have different levels of contents or truth conditions, ranging from utterance-bound or reflexive truth conditions to referential ones.

This "pluri-propositionalist" idea—as it is sometimes called—is key to understanding Korta and Perry's work, and it is one of their most original and most controversial theses. A direct result of 'seriously' considering utterances as actions, they take it as indispensable for developing an explanation of reference and meaning. Indeed, taking the "utterance/action-centered" approach to reference and meaning to its last consequences is perhaps the main contribution of the book to the existing literature. It re-defines the terms and limits of the discussions in pragmatics and in the theories of reference and meaning and sets the ground for new and exciting developments.

To begin with, pluri-propositionalism clearly differentiates Korta and Perry's proposal from other pragmatic theories, which all adopt some form or other of "mono-propositionalism": the claim that each utterance is associated with one, and only one, content or proposition that corresponds with its truth-conditions or the proposition expressed. Critical Pragmatics, instead, holds that there is a variety of contents, starting from a minimal content called "the utterance-bound content", that is determined only by the meaning of the words used and the fact that the utterance was made. From this, by taking into consideration parameters like the intentions of the speaker, the notion-networks exploited in the use of proper names, and various contextual facts, the authors distinguish several kinds of truth-conditions or contents: utterance-bound, speaker-bound, network-bound, referential and referential*.

Korta and Perry maintain that this pluralistic account is not only a basic tool for a proper account of the reference of singular terms (first 9 chapters of the book) but that it also deals very well with many of the issues that have occupied pragmatists for the last decades (Chapters 10–13). The main reason, to put it simply, is that mono-propositionalism sets all the weight and all of the requirements (like being the output of the semantic module, the input for pragmatic reasoning, accounting for issues of the cognitive significance of utterances and thoughts, and several others) on one single proposition and this, Korta and Perry claim, is clearly expecting too much from one proposition alone.

The book has 13 clearly distinguished and very informative chapters. The first 9 focus on topics related to reference and meaning. Chapter 2 is a particularly good—readable and precise—account of the theories of reference in the

20th century. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the basic terms of the debate and of the authors' proposal; notions like "roles" and "referential plans", which include a variety of intentions, are defined and explained. Chapters 5–8 deal with demonstratives, indexicals, names and definite descriptions, respectively. Chapter 9 elaborates on Perry's well-known notion of unarticulated constituents.

Chapters 10–13 discuss some fundamental topics in pragmatics. In Chapter 10 Korta and Perry explore the implications of Critical Pragmatics for speech-act theory and they develop an idea of locutionary content understood not as the output of semantics, but rather as "a joint determination of the semantic part, the pragmatic part, and other facts about the utterance" (p. 140). They argue further that this notion is better positioned than that of 'what is said' to fulfill some of the roles normally attributed to the latter, like that of "grounding the concept of the proposition expressed by an utterance" (p. 124). In Chapters 11 and 12, they dig further into the notion of pluri-propositionalism, first showing (Chapter 11) how it can be easily accommodated within Grice's pragmatic theory of implicatures and then (Chapter 12) how it situates Critical Pragmatics within the interface between semantics and pragmatics. Briefly put, Korta and Perry are able to adopt a position in between literalists and contextualists, one that "[S]hould please the minimalist, without offending the contextualist [...] With minimalists and contextualists alike we admit that near-side pragmatics has an important role to play in determining what the speaker says in uttering a sentence. That is why our approach might be adequately rendered as radically minimalist—regarding semantics—and moderately contextualist—regarding pragmatics" (pp. 145–6).

On a critical note, the treatment offered to some topics is sometimes not as detailed as one might want. This is understandable, the book covers a lot and the proposal is brand new. Also, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it shows that Critical Pragmatics still has much to say and leaves open new lines of research, to be developed further. This is actually being done. See for instance [Corazza \(2012\)](#) on same-saying, [Garmendia \(2010\)](#) on irony and [Korta and Zubeldia \(2014\)](#) on evidential particles. Also, you can find a sort of précis of the book in [Korta and Perry \(2013\)](#).

I would like to linger here on the Korta and Perry's account of temporal indexicals, focusing on the case of 'now'. This is a small issue in the book, covered in four pages (pp. 169–173, although see also [Perry, 2003](#)), so my comments here are to be taken with a grain of salt. I find it relevant though because, being as it is a central topic in any account of temporal reference, it would be nice to have a handy and 'easy' solution such as the one the authors defend.

There is a well-known discussion about 'now'. Cases involving answering machines—"I am not here now"—or written notes put into question the idea that whenever we use 'now' we are making reference to the moment of utterance or rather to a (more or less) short period of time containing the moment of utterance. That is, these cases challenge the idea that the reference of 'now' is fully determined by its linguistic meaning—as it should be, if it were an essential indexical. See [Kaplan \(1989\)](#) for an account of 'now' as an essential indexical, [Predelli \(1998\)](#) for a discussion of different cases and [Perry \(2003\)](#) for a discussion of the different options.

Korta and Perry have an explanation ready for this. Their basic claim is that there are important differences between face-to-face and, as they call it, technologically driven communication (be it written communication or through answering machines, sms, whatsapps, chats, etc.). These differences are particularly relevant in the case of indexicals like 'now' or 'here'. To account for them, they introduce a key distinction between utterances and tokens (of utterances), "[U]tterances are human acts, with all the mental and intentional properties that such acts have. Tokens are basically traces of utterances that can be perceived by hearers" (p. 71).

Utterances are thus particular cases of intentional action and the hearer—or reader—perceives not the utterance, but its effects, i.e. its token or tokens (assuming each utterance has, or can have, several effects). Some of these tokens are intended and some are not, and the hearer, in order to understand the utterance, has to perceive the intended effects and has to perceive them as the effects the speaker wanted to provoke with her action.

Now, in face-to-face communication there isn't much difference between perceiving the utterance and perceiving the token, the token being the sound that travels to the hearer's ears. But writing introduces a key difference because the tokens remain long after the utterance. In writing, the time of perception is detached from the moment of utterance and thus what the hearer (reader) perceives is *only* the effect of the utterance: the token. From this, she is able to infer that there was an utterance some time earlier.

When perceiving an utterance, the hearer does different things. She perceives a sentence, a meaningful succession of noises or marks and also an intentional act, an utterance made by someone, at some time, at some place and with certain intentions. Grasping a sentence alone, or a token in Korta and Perry's terminology, is not enough for communication. For one thing, as Korta and Perry defend, tokens are not true or false; only utterances can be. For another, tokens alone are not enough to fully understand the speaker's intentions. Grasping the token is thus a necessary but not sufficient step for communication, both in face-to-face and in written discourse.

Now, common sense as all this is, I myself would have benefited from a more elaborate explanation. I fail to see for instance how this distinction between utterances and their effects—tokens—is explanatory with regard to 'now'. More precisely, I fail to see how it adds to the distinction between utterances and sentences (both written or orally transmitted). Some questions thus remain open. What is the relevance of this distinction, beyond stating the true claim that in written discourse the hearer has direct access only to sentences written down (effects or tokens) and can have only indirect

access to the utterance (and the intentions of the speaker and the key elements of the context of utterance)? How does the hearer 'jump' from a token of a written sentence to the utterance itself? She seems to have access to what [Predelli \(1998\)](#) calls the context of evaluation, but how does she get access to the intentions of the speaker and the context of utterance? And how does this distinction affect the status of 'now'? Should we consider it a demonstrative or as some sort of non-essential indexical?

Temporal reference is a fundamental issue for any theory of reference and it would have been nice to hear a bit more of what Korta and Perry propose. Reading the book, it is clear that *Critical Pragmatics* has much to say on this, but, as it stands, it cannot be considered as a full explanation. Nevertheless, I do believe that this is one of the basic issues where *Critical Pragmatics* has opened new and potentially fertile lines of research, offering an exceptionally rich and stimulating theoretical background to keep building upon. Lastly, notice that I have focused here on their treatment of temporal indexicals but the same could be said, I think, of spatial ones ('here') and of what [Castañeda \(1967\)](#) called "quasi-indexicals" ('then' and 'there').

All in all, there is no doubt that Korta and Perry's book is an important and highly original contribution to the fields of pragmatics and philosophy of language, one that will need to be taken into account by all researchers in the area and which will be amply discussed in the years to come. It covers many difficult and central topics in an engaging way, it offers a novel and attractive account and it leaves many doors open for future research. The book thus is a must-read for philosophers and linguists interested in the analysis of reference, meaning and communication.

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