On the relevance of parentheticals [1]

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Abstract

Potts (2008) has argued that apppositions are amongst a range of phenomena which do not contribute to the truth conditional content of the utterances that contain them but which 'contextualize the main clause's contribution to the discourse'. In this paper, I argue that the idea that utterances may include constituents which contribute to their interpretation by altering the context for their interpretation applies to a range of parenthetical phenomena. Using my work on *and*-parentheticals and *that-is* parentheticals, I argue that there are different ways in which parentheticals may play a role in the pragmatic interpretation of their hosts. While some parentheticals affect the interpretation of their hosts at the level of implicit content, others may affect the interpretation of their explicit content. In particular, there are some parentheticals – e.g. *that is*-parentheticals and some *and*-parentheticals which play a role in the identification of the truth conditional content of their hosts. While this suggests that not all parentheticals are completely sealed off from the truth conditional content of their hosts at the level of pragmatic interpretation, it does not mean that the content of a *that is* or *and*-parenthetical is *part* of the content of the host. In this sense, it is compositionally independent, as Potts' (2005) analysis would predict. The point is that the relevance of these parentheticals lies in the information they communicate *about* the truth conditional content of its host, or, in other words, in what I have called their 'meta-conceptual' role.

1. Introduction: divisions of labour

Parentheticals have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives, and not all of these focus on the same set of phenomena. Thus those linguists who study language as a form of social interaction have tended to treat parentheticals as examples of the sort of disfluency which characterizes unplanned discourse. Their examples include hesitations, revisions and self corrections, incidental comments about what is being said in the host utterance, self-addressed questions and reminders, responses to something external to the conversation, and questions designed to elicit feedback or to check attention. Such disfluencies, claims Wichmann (2001:189) are 'evidence that speakers have trouble planning their utterances, but are constrained by interactional principles to keep talking'.

However, not all structures which have been described as parenthetical are part of unplanned discourse. The following example (from Blakemore 2005) is from a planned, written source, and it is difficult to see how it could be justified by an interactional principle which requires the communicator to keep talking:

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(1) The driver of Al-Kindi's only remaining ambulance – <u>the other three had been stolen or looted</u> – had disappeared. So the dangerously ill Mr Khassem was bundled into a clapped-out rust-bitten Moskavich 408. (*The Independent* 16/5/03).

At the same time, this sort of example is excluded from the range of examples which have interested syntacticians. Thus Taglicht (1998) argues that parentheticals must be distinguished from the sort of diversions and intrusions which characterize spontaneous discourse, and that there must be something that justifies the utterance of a parenthetical but not, for example, the utterance of 'Come in' mid-sentence on hearing a knock on the door. Taglicht's concern is with the sort of parenthetical intrusion which can, or at least, which he thinks should be, accommodated in the grammar – for example, appositive relative clauses, adverbials, nominal appositions. For him, then, the question must be how   such structures can be accommodated within a grammar in which notions of immediate dominance and linear precedence play a central role. However, this leaves us with the question of how we accommodate the intrusion in (1). It is not like the utterance of 'Come in' mid sentence. But it is not like the sort of parenthetical phenomena discussed by syntacticians either, and I have yet to meet a syntactician who would want to accommodate it in the grammar.

In fact, it seems that even the parenthetical structures which have been treated in the grammar are regarded as 'other' in some sense. For syntacticians such as Emonds (1979), Safir (1986) and Espinal (1991), this otherness is reflected in the syntax itself. Thus all their attempts to accommodate parentheticals have involved extending the grammar in some sense. However, Potts (2002, 2005) has argued that the otherness of adverbial parentheticals such as the *as*-parenthetical in (2) derives not from the syntax which is, as he says, requires nothing non-standard in the way of clause design, but from the semantics:

(2) It is, as you know, a very long book.

In particular, the proposition expressed by a parenthetical is a 'non-at-issue' entailment (or conventional implicature) which does not interact semantically with the clause in which it is they are embedded. That is, according to Potts (2005), the truth conditional content of a parenthetical is sealed off from that of the host so that while it may have its own truth conditions, these truth conditions are independent of the truth conditional content of the host. According to this view, the speaker of (2) is committed to the 'at-issue' proposition that it is a very long book *and* the 'non-at-issue' proposition that you know that it is a very long book.

As I have said elsewhere (Blakemore 2006), the claim that a parenthetical is not 'at issue' raises the question of how it does contribute to the interpretation of the utterance which contains it. More recently Potts (2008) has argued that appositions are amongst a range of phenomena which do not contribute to the truth conditional content of the utterances that contain them but which alter the context for their interpretation, or 'contextualize' the main clause's contribution to the discourse. It seems to me that the idea that utterances may include constituents which contribute to their interpretation by altering the context for their interpretation applies not only to the appositional phenomena discussed by Potts, but also to the sort of phenomenon illustrated in (1) (that is, the sort of parenthetical which no-one would want to include in the grammar). In fact, it seems that it is the fact that the interpretation of the parenthetical in (1) is related to the pragmatic interpretation of its host which distinguishes this sort of intrusion from from Taglicht's example of 'Come in' uttered mid-sentence. The parenthetical in (1) is pragmatically integrated, even though it is not syntactically integrated. Taglicht's 'Come in' example is not. Putting this in the relevance theoretic terms of this

paper, the relevance of the parenthetical in (1) lies in the way that it is related to the relevance of its host. The relevance of an interruption like 'Come in' is not.

At the same time, however, I am going to argue that there are different ways in which parentheticals may achieve pragmatic integration: there is more than one way of being 'non-at-issue'. More particularly, I am going to argue that there are *some* parentheticals - for example, *and*-parentheticals such as (3) and *that is*-parentheticals such as (4) and (5) - whose relevance lies in the role that they plays in the identification of the truth conditional content of their hosts. In other words, it is not the case that all parentheticals are completely sealed off from the truth conditional content of their hosts at the level of pragmatic interpretation. As we will see, this does not mean that the content of the parenthetical is *part* of the content of the host. In this sense, it is compositionally independent, as Potts' analysis would predict. The point is that the relevance of these parentheticals lies in the information they communicate *about* the truth conditional content of its host, or, in other words, in the role that it plays in identifying the conceptual content of the host.

(3) What is obvious – <u>and we have eye-witness reports</u> – is that they were killed. (from a discussion of the causes of the extinction of the population of Easter Island, BBC, Radio 4, 26 August 2005).

(4) What I think we need, you see, is a room with a table, <u>that is, a table which students could sit around</u>. (adapted from LLC s.3.4 47-57)

(5) I would like everybody – <u>that is, everybody who is taking this course for credit</u> – to hand their essay plans in by next Friday. (Salford University lecturer 2009)

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, I will use my work on *and*-parentheticals to illustrate the different ways in which parentheticals may achieve pragmatic integration focussing on the distinction between parentheticals which are pragmatically integrated in the sense that they are interpreted in a context of assumptions made accessible by their hosts, on the one hand, and parentheticals which are pragmatically integrated in the sense that they actually affect the interpretation of their hosts at the level of implicit content, on the one hand, and at the level of explicit content, on the other. In Section 3, I turn to *or*-parentheticals, and show that while some *or*-parentheticals may affect the interpretation of the explicit content of their hosts, others perform a meta-linguistic function in the sense that they communicate information about the linguistic properties of their hosts. In Section 4, I contrast the meta-linguistic function of these *or*-parentheticals with what I shall call the 'meta-conceptual' role played by *that is*-parentheticals. In the concluding section I return to the question of whether and in what sense parentheticals can contribute to the truth conditional content of their hosts.

2. *And*-parentheticals

Let us start by comparing the parenthetical in (1) with the one in (6) (from Blakemore 2005):

(1) The driver of Al-Kindi's only remaining ambulance – <u>the other three had been stolen or looted</u> – had disappeared. So the dangerously ill Mr Khassem was bundled into a clapped-out rust-bitten Moskavich 408. (*The Independent* 16/5/03).

(6) A helicopter, a helicopter – and here was me who'd never even flown in an ordinary plane – would come and pick me up at …. (from reading of *Stargazing: memoirs of a young lighthouse keeper*, by Peter Hill, abridged by Laurence Waring, read for Radio 4 by David Tenant)

The parenthetical in (1) is pragmatically integrated with the host in the sense that it provides an answer to a question raised by the host ('Why was there only one ambulance?). That is, it is interpreted in a context which is made accessible by the host, but it does not affect either its explicit or implicit content. This means that although the host and parenthetical are related in this way, each will be interpreted as having its own relevance, and there is no sense in which they can be taken to contribute towards a single proposition whose relevance is greater than that of the parenthetical and host taken individually.

If this is right, then the host and parenthetical in (1) are related in much the same way as the segments of a discourse sequence such as (7):

(7) He's definitely been in here. Those are his spectacles.

As Blakemore & Carston (2005) have argued, an *and*-conjunction is acceptable only if it can be interpreted as communicating a co-ordinated proposition which is more relevant than each conjunct taken individually. Hence the unacceptability of (8):

(8) ?? He's definitely been in here and those are his spectacles.

Similarly, because the parenthetical and host in (1) cannot be interpreted as contributing to a single proposition whose relevance is greater than either one taken individually, *and* cannot be used as a means of communicating pragmatic integration:

(9) ?? The driver of Al-Kindi's only remaining ambulance – and the other three had been stolen or looted – had disappeared

Now clearly, one would not want to say that *and* forms a *co-ordinated* proposition in (6). Nevertheless in contrast with (1), the parenthetical has no relevance beyond its effect on the interpretation of its host, and thus it seems that there is a sense in which parenthetical plus host contribute to the recovery of a single proposition whose relevance is greater than either parenthetical and host taken individually. In particular, the *and*-parenthetical in (6) refines the audience's search for the contextual assumptions which enable him to interpret the repetition in the host. While the repetition (which was given emphatic stress in this reading) encourages the audience to re-visit the contextual assumptions made accessible by his concept of a helicopter for the derivation of implicatures which capture the excitement of traveling in a helicopter, the parenthetical ensures that he will imagine the prospect of traveling in a helicopter for someone who has never flown in any kind of plane at all. In other words, the parenthetical alters the context for the recovery of the *implicit* content of the host. It affects the interpretation of the host at the level of *implicit* communication.

The *and*-parenthetical in (3) also affects the interpretation of the host; however, this time, it is at the level of *explicit* content. According, to Sperber & Wilson (1995), the explicatures of an utterance are constructed by enriching a linguistically encoded logical form to a point where it expresses a determinate proposition such as (10a), and then optionally embedding it under a higher-level description: for example, a speech-act description such as (10b), or a propositional attitude description such as (10c) or (10d):

(10)(a) They were killed.
(b) Some researchers claim they were killed.

(c) Some researchers believe that they were killed.

(d) The speaker thinks it is obvious that they were killed.

Wilson & Sperber (1993) call (10a) the *proposition expressed* by the utterance, and (10b – d) its *higher-level explicatures*. An explicature – including a higher-level explicature – has its own truth conditions, and is capable of being true or false in its own right. However, only the proposition expressed is normally seen as contributing to the truth conditions of the associated utterance. Thus the higher-level explicature in (10d) will not be part of the truth conditional content of the host utterance in (3).

Now let us consider the role played by the *and*-parenthetical in (3). On the assumption that eye-witness reports constitute the best evidence that a historian might provide, we could say that its relevance lies in the effect that it has on the hearer's understanding of the degree of commitment that is being communicated by the host, or in other words, in its contribution to the hearer's understanding of the sense in which the proposition expressed can be said to be obvious. In this sense then, it affects the interpretation of the higher level explicit content of the host, but not the interpretation of its truth conditional content.

As I have shown in an earlier publication, an *and*-parenthetical may also affect the interpretation of the truth conditional content of its host at the level of pragmatic interpretation. The example in (11) is taken from Blakemore (2005):

(11) You wouldn't believe what happened when Kevin and I were at the Kro Bar tonight. We were out in the garden and a big rat – and I mean BIG rat – ran out from under our table (from Blakemore 2005)

The way in which the parenthetical achieves this effect can be explained in terms of Robyn Carston's (2002) account of the pragmatics of on-line concept construction. The idea is that we use our contextual assumptions about rats and the encoded meaning of *big* to recover a pragmatically derived concept BIG FOR A RAT*. However, the parenthetical will encourage us to search our contextual assumptions further to derive a different concept BIG FOR A RAT** - and we will assume that this is a more faithful representation of the sort of rat the speaker is recalling (a rat which is much bigger than any normal big rat).

3. *Or*-parentheticals

It seems that certain *or*-parentheticals may also play a role in the identification of the explicit content of their hosts.[2] Consider (12):

(12) Jackie's husband – <u>or at least I'm assuming he's her husband</u> – has offered to drive us to the airport.

The role played by the *or*-parenthetical in this example is similar to that of the *and*-parenthetical in (3). It contributes to the recovery of a higher-level explicature. However, whereas in (3) the hearer is intended to recover a higher-level explicature which conveys a greater degree of commitment to the proposition expressed than any higher-level explicature

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[2] I am grateful to Anne Abeillé for bringing this sort of example to my attention.

he would have recovered otherwise, in (12) the hearer is intended to recover a higher-level explicature which conveys less certainty towards the truth of the proposition expressed. [3]

However, not all *or*-parentheticals play this sort of role. As Burton-Roberts (1999) suggests, parentheticals such as the ones in (13) and (14) are meta-linguistic in the sense that they communicate information about the linguistic properties of their hosts:

> (13) The Victorians were very fond of /məʊv/, <u>or /mɔːv/, as they used to say</u> (from Blakemore 2007)
> (14) In the end, Harold, <u>or Hayley, as he became known</u>, ended up living with Roy above his greasy spoon café (from Blakemore 2007)

The parenthetical in (13) communicates the information that a word in the host has an alternative pronunciation, while the one in (14) introduces an alternative linguistic route to the referent which the hearer is assumed to have already identified. This means that name *Hayley* in (10) is not being used to refer, or being used to help the hearer identify the referent of *Harold*. It also means that the relevance of the parenthetical will depend on contextual assumptions about the *names* 'Hayley' and 'Harold' rather than the assumptions about the referent itself. For example, from the information that *Hayley* is a woman's name and *Harold* is a man's name, a hearer might derive the information that Roy lived with a transsexual.

4. *That is*-parentheticals

An *or*-parenthetical such as (14) might be described as a reformulation. But so, it would seem, might the *that* is-parenthetical in (4):

> (4) What I think we need, you see, is a room with a table, <u>that is, a table which students could sit around</u>. (adapted from LLC s.3.4 47-57)

The question is whether these parentheticals all reformulate their hosts in the same way. In fact, it seems that while both types of parenthetical can be described as meta-representational, only the *or*-reformulations in (13) and (14) are meta-linguistic. *That is*-reformulations are *meta-conceptual* in the sense that they communication information about the *conceptual* content of their hosts.

The parenthetical in (4) communicates information about the concept the speaker intends to communicate by uttering *table*. Specifically, it communicates the information that the hearer should use the encoded meaning of *table* to recover a concept of a table which is large and high enough for people to sit around rather than a concept of, say, a low, small coffee table. However, although the hearer's recovery of this proposition depends on the parenthetical in this way, it cannot be said that the content of the parenthetical is itself *part* of the truth conditional content of the host: it is simply about that content. Not surprisingly, when a *that is*-parenthetical is embedded in a belief report, for example (15), the hearer will not understand its explicit content to be part of the belief which is being reported:

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[3] It seems that this might be the key to the explanation for the use of *or* in these examples rather than *and*. *And* is informationally stronger than *or* in the sense that a sentence of the form *P and Q* entails a sentence of the form *P or Q* but not vice versa. This suggests we might expect *and* in cases such as the ones discussed in Section 2, but *or* in an example such as (12). The level of commitment communicated by parenthetical plus host is more than the level of commitment communicated by the host on its own in (3), but less than the level of commitment communicated by the host in (12).

(15) The lecturers believe that the department needs more tables, that is to say, tables that students can sit around.

The parenthetical is, as Potts would say, *speaker-oriented* in the sense it must be attributed to the speaker reporting the lecturers' belief rather than to the lecturers themselves. But the point is that the speaker is communicating his commitment to the propositional content of the parenthetical only as a means of communicating his commitment to the content of the host, which is, in this case, the proposition that the lecturers believe that the department needs more tables.

Similarly, in (5), the parenthetical communicates a proposition about the interpretation of the quantifier *everybody*. It specifies how its domain should be interpreted and in this way allows the hearer to make hypotheses about the relevance of the information communicated by the host.

Examples such as (4) and (5) might appear to illustrate the sort of disfluency which characterizes unplanned discourse. As we have seen, it has been argued that such disfluencies should be explained in terms of interactional principles which require speakers to keep talking (cf Wichmann (2001:189). However, I have argued that within a relevance theoretic framework, they can be explained in terms of the pursuit of relevance (cf Blakemore 2007). As Sperber & Wilson (1995:204) point out, the fact that an utterance is produced and processed over time means that a hearer will be able to access some of its constituent concepts, with their associated logical and encyclopedic entries, before others. This means that certain contextual assumptions will be triggered before others, and that a hearer who is assuming optimal relevance will use these to construct hypotheses about the speaker's informative intention. This suggests that the point of producing the parenthetical in, say, (4) is to ensure that the hearer will direct his efforts to the recovery of those effects from an explicature which includes the intended concept communicated by *table* rather than waste processing effort in the construction of an explicature that doesn't yield a faithful interpretation of the speaker's thoughts. A similar explanation can be given for (5). In other words, in both cases the use of the disrupted structure is consistent with the speaker's aim of achieving relevance for a minimum cost in processing effort.

5. Conclusion: on the non-truth-conditionality of parentheticals

If the relevance of the parenthetical in (4) or (5) is tied to the role it plays in identifying the explicit content of the host, then it seems that we have to say that it plays a role in the identification of the truth conditional content of the utterance that contains it, and that it is not after all sealed off from the truth conditions of its host in the way that Potts has claimed. A similar point can be made about the *and*-parenthetical in (11). Does this mean that these parentheticals are in fact truth conditional?

There are many semanticists (for example, Recanati (2004), Stanley & Szabo (2000) who assume that we can make intuitive judgements about what counts as the truth conditional content of utterances, and there are some (e.g. Stanley 2000) who would argue that these judgements are the central empirical data for a semantic theory. However, there are many cases in which intuitions diverge, and where it is not clear what these intuitions are really intuitions about: are they about encoded word meaning, literal truth, or what the speaker meant (in some more general sense).

Now, if by 'truth conditions' you mean the truth conditions which are determined by the encoded meanings of the words in the host, or by literal meanings then, you would have to say that there is no sense in which these parentheticals affect the truth conditions of their

hosts. However, if by 'truth conditions' you mean the truth conditions of the *thought communicated by the host*, then it would seem that you would have to say they do. Returning to (11), it seems clear that a thought which has BIG FOR A RAT* as a constituent is not the same as the thought in which this constituent is replaced by BIG FOR A RAT**: It does not yield the same contextual implications as the original. Since this thought is recovered from the encoded semantic representation by pragmatic inference, it seems that we must say that the parenthetical affects the truth conditions of the pragmatically derived content of the host or that it affects truth conditions at the level of pragmatic interpretation.

Similarly, a thought which has EVERYBODY IN THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS CLASS AT SALFORD UNIVERSITY WHO IS TAKING THE COURSE FOR CREDIT IN 2009 as a constituent does not have the same truth conditions as a thought which has EVERYBODY WHO HAS ATTENDED A SOCIOLINGUISTICS CLASS AT SALFORD UNIVERISTY IN 2009 as a constituent. But these thoughts can only be derived from the encoded semantic representation of the host utterance by pragmatic inference. Thus it seems that in these cases we must say that parentheticals can only contribute to the truth conditions of their hosts at the level of pragmatic interpretation. Potts (2008) has suggested that pragmatic enrichment might turn out to be the area in which we see most clearly what role parentheticals play. My discussion of *that-is* parentheticals and the *and*-parenthetical in (11) has indeed shown that there are parentheticals whose relevance lies in the role that they play in the pragmatic enrichment of their hosts.

But as Potts shows, this cannot be taken to mean that we understand what is communicated by the parenthetical as being *part* of the truth conditions of the thought communicated. The speaker of (4) or (11) will be understood to be communicating two distinct thoughts, each with its own truth conditions. In this sense the parenthetical is compositionally independent of the host, as Potts' analysis would predict. At the same time, as we have seen, the thought communicated by the parenthetical is *about* the thought communicated by the host, and it has no relevance beyond its role in identifying this thought. Thus it can only be said to contribute to the truth conditions of its host in the sense that it communicates a proposition which is *about* its truth conditional content.

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