**Pragmatics and Epistemic Vigilance**

Sperber et al. (2010) claim that humans have developed a critical alertness to the risk of being misinformed by interlocutors – what they call ‘epistemic vigilance’. It subsumes several cognitive mechanisms targeted at assessing the speaker’s reliability (i.e. her competence and benevolence) and the believability of the communicated content. Interestingly, they suggest that “the abilities for overt intentional communication and epistemic vigilance must have evolved together, and must also develop together and be put to use together” (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 360).

According to Sperber et al. (2010), the scope of the interaction between epistemic vigilance mechanisms and the comprehension process is relatively narrow. Both are activated by the same communicative behaviour, but the only role of the epistemic vigilance system is to assess the believability of the interpretation resulting from the comprehension process.

I propose to extend the scope of this interaction as follows. Not only do epistemic vigilance mechanisms affect the believability of a piece of communicated information, but they also contribute to the assessment of the acceptability of interpretative hypotheses (i.e. whether an interpretative hypothesis about the speaker’s meaning is retained and attributed to the speaker as the intended interpretation).

Pragmatic interpretation and epistemic vigilance mechanisms may work in parallel and interact with each other in constrained ways. Specifically, I suggest that epistemic vigilance mechanisms may filter out interpretative hypotheses that are incompatible with the speaker’s mental states (i.e. her beliefs and desires) or retain interpretative hypotheses that are accidentally irrelevant to the interpreter but compatible with them.

Finally, I suggest some possible implications for developmental pragmatics. The emergence of epistemic vigilance mechanisms targeted at assessing the communicator’s competence and benevolence may correlate with different developmental stages in pragmatics (i.e. ‘naïve optimism’, ‘cautious optimism’ and ‘sophisticated understanding’ (Sperber, 1994)).

**Selected References**

