Beyond modularity in pragmatics. The role of attention and associative processes in utterance understanding

Marco Mazzone
University of Catania
Department of Human Sciences
mazzonem@unict.it

In pragmatics, as well as in other cognitive domains, modularism is an influential model of explanation. A case in point is Relevance Theory, one of the most important approaches in the field. According to RT, utterance interpretation is performed by an automatic inferential process subserved by a module specialized for that function.

A crucial, though little recognized, issue concerning modularism is the relationship between the hypothesized domain-specific processes and the domain-general processes (such as associative and attentional ones) which are known to spread through the entire cortex. There are two different aspects of this issue that I intend to focus on here. First, as modular explanations are made precise, modules tend to be conceived in less stringent terms and thus to acquire many of the features that characterize domain-general processes. As a consequence, it becomes harder and harder to preserve a clear theoretical distinction between genuinely modular and domain-general explanations. Second, modular processes are conceived of as both different and segregated from domain-general processes, but then one has to ask how plausible is that domain-general processes stop at the boundaries of modules. For instance, must we expect that associative activation spreading through the cortex is briskly changed into a wholly different process whenever it runs across a module?

A way out of these problems would be to consider modularism as a functional explanation in need of being accounted for in terms of more basic mechanisms. If this were the case, then the functionally individuated mechanisms might be actually implemented by domain-general processes. However, this would amount to giving up the thesis of genuinely domain-specific processes, a move that few modularists are willing to make.

My purpose here is to summarize some considerations on the possible role of associative and attentional processes in pragmatics and then, on the basis of this picture, to argue that the problems described above seem to affect RT – with special regard to some recent papers of relevance theorists.

Specifically, I propose a view of associative processes in which experience-based schemata play a crucial role in structuring our representations. Due to this schematic structure, associative activation is able to produce inferential effects in utterance understanding, that is, to promote the same interpretations that would be arrived at if genuine inferences were performed. Moreover, I propose that attention interact with associative processing by giving special stability to some of the activated representations, especially as far as speaker-related information is concerned.

How different from the above account is the one proposed by RT? On the one hand, it can be shown that not only does RT make an appeal, though peripheral, to associative processes, it also attributes associative features to the processes which are claimed to be properly modular. As a consequence, the opposition between modular and non-modular accounts is at risk of fading away. On the other hand, RT seems to explicitly deny that its account is compatible with domain-general explanations of pragmatic processing. But in this case, it should explain how is it that domain-general processes are prevented from following their natural course when they impinge on the boundaries of the hypothesized modules.