English pragmatics: an analysis of the nature of human language and communication

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

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To Dani, for having helped me as much as he has,

but especially to my sister:

this project, as everything else, belongs to both of us.

Introduction

All throughout my dissertation, I will be examining the intricate nature of human language and communication by taking into consideration the principal aspects that may ultimately make a communicative exchange as successful as possible. In so doing, I will be dividing my dissertation into three clearly-distinguished – albeit intimately related – chapters: the first one will be devoted to commenting on the difference between semantics and pragmatics – that is to say, the contrast between linguistic meaning and speaker's meaning –, thus demonstrating that trying to draw a rigid distinction between both realms may eventually prove quite unsuitable, since they are constantly merging and influencing each other during verbal interactions. Moreover, I will also explore a further, engrossing difference some authors have established between linguistic meaning, what is said, and what is meant as regards utterance meaning: the so-called underdeterminacy thesis.

The second chapter, conversely, will revolve around the basic properties of human communication. Its structure will, in turn, consist of three main sections: in the first place, I will be revising the Gricean maxims, studying the major importance conversational implicatures assume in the course of a talk exchange, and exploring the cooperative nature of human communication. Similarly, I will also highlight the crucial role adopted by common ground in communicative exchanges – a concept that makes reference to those pieces of rooted information which are mutually shared by both the addressor and the addressee, and which seem virtually essential in order to communicate effectively. Moreover, I will also examine a recently-studied notion, that of multimodality in language, which upholds that human language is the result of a phylogenetic process that has eventually derived in a stratified, multi-modal system, and that, consequently, there actually exists a close marriage between both the linguistic code and the gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and non-verbal cues participants in a given communicative exchange produce while speaking.

The aforementioned theoretical framework will be entirely endorsed by a carefully-selected bibliography that will serve me to subsequently analyse a number of final audiovisual case examples which merit recognition from a pragmatic point of view: one sketch, selected from a TV series, aims at evincing how communication proves complete only when the linguistic code operates in conjunction with gestures

(i.e. the multimodality of language) and the common ground shared between the addressor and the addressee; one comedy skit, extracted from an American film, demonstrates the way in which a talk exchange might eventually fail due to a conspicuous absence of mutually-shared bases between the speaker and the receiver, and one final case example – comprising an excerpt from an American comedy-drama and a TV commercial – illustrates how participants in a dialogue may ultimately misinterpret each other when gestures are not combined with linguistic cues.

The primary purpose of this dissertation is, therefore, to evidence how, albeit human beings can possibly – and highly effectively – communicate by uniquely making use of either spoken language or gestures – sign language of the deaf and the mute being the most outstanding example of the latter –, there are still several instances of communicative exchanges in which successful communication will be ultimately prevented – or, at least, it will be presumably more difficult to establish – if speakers dispense with any of the aforementioned constituents – namely, the linguistic code, the multimodality of language (including co-speech gestures, body movements, facial expressions or prosodic information), and the common ground built between the addressor and the addressee.

1. Semantics vs. Pragmatics

The study of meaning in human language has often been divided into two complementary – yet not clearly distinguishable – major components: semantics and pragmatics. Despite early hypotheses did suggest that there exists a clear difference between these two, the fact is that offering so sharp a contrast may not prove particularly suitable, since both of them actually intermingle during communication. Be it as it may, albeit the conceptual distinction that has been traditionally drawn between both terms is still blurred in modern linguistics, semantics has heretofore been defined as "the study of meaning (...) the study of the relationships between linguistic form and meaning" (Kroeger, 2019, p. 4). Semantics is primarily concerned with linguistic meaning only, with the conventional, inherent meaning of words, sentences, and linguistic expressions; namely, the definition which is most likely to be found in a standard dictionary – in the case of words (Saeed, 1997, pp. 3-22). Put crudely, semantics examines "sentence meaning" (Saeed, 1997, p. 18), literal meaning encoded in words themselves and in the way in which they are organised and combined, regardless of any contextual feature.

Pragmatics, conversely, corresponds to utterance meaning (also referred to as "speaker's meaning" [Saeed, 1997, p. 18]) and it is the study of language usage. Its central focus is meaning that arises in context of use, primarily the crucial role context adopts in an effective linguistic exchange. In addition to extralinguistic information, pragmatics also explores the essential function performed by the addressee in decoding messages. Moreover, it examines the importance assumed by encyclopaedic knowledge and common ground in inferential processes, as well as the speaker's intended meaning (Saeed, 1997, pp. 3-22). In order to illustrate this difference, it is worth considering the following example: suppose speaker A – let's say, a professor – states "That window is open", which basically means that a framework without pane is not closed (linguistic meaning). Nevertheless, were this assertion to be uttered in a classroom, the academic may expect somebody to close it (speaker's meaning). In Paul Grice's terms (1975, pp. 41-58), what is said (sentence meaning) differs from what is implicated (utterance meaning).

In his division of semiotics, philosopher Charles Morris defined semantics as "the study of the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable (...) and

pragmatics [as] the study of the relation of signs to interpreters" (1938, p. 6, cited in Levinson, 1983, p. 1). Philosopher and logician Rudolph Carnap, heavily influenced by Morris's early distinction, formulated his theory devoting special attention to the users of language, and thus suggested that pragmatics painstakingly takes care of the interpretation of the meaning communicated through language made by both the speaker and the receiver:

> If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or to put it in more general terms, to the user of the language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics. (...) if we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expression of the designate, we are in the field of semantics. (Carnap, 1938, p. 2, cited in Levinson, 1983, pp. 2-3)

Notwithstanding, the forenamed distinction may seem a highly simplistic generalization as regards the study of meaning in human language: according to that restrictive division, the literal, context-free part of a word's meaning should be isolated from any given contextual feature, thereby assuming that pragmatics is restricted to the study of extralinguistic information solely, and that it has little to do with linguistic structure. However, offering so marked a contrast may eventually be problematic and controversial. A further example of how certain aspects apparently related exclusively to semantics are ultimately influenced by context might run as follows: consider the word "brother". Uttered within a monastery, the term will be deliberately employed so as to address a fellow member of the said religious congregation. Truth be told, nobody would expect a monk naming his brethren as a North American black man would address his intimates in an informal, friendly conversation. Similarly, on no account will a competent speaker infer that a person belonging to a religious order seriously considers his fellows as actual male siblings. "Brother" being ambiguous, deciding which of its multiple meanings is being employed in each situation does not amount merely to its conventionally assigned meaning; rather, it greatly depends on the appropriate use of the term in context.

Along the same lines, Gazdar upholds that

> pragmatics has as its topic those aspects of the meaning of utterances which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to the truth conditions of the sentence uttered. Put crudely: PRAGMATICS = MEANING – TRUTH CONDITIONS. (1979, p. 2, cited in Levinson, 1983, p. 12)

In order to comprehend the previous quotation, it is worth briefly defining the notion of "truth-condition" (Portner, 2005, p. 13). Truth-conditions – which have nothing to do with actual truth or falsehood – can be described as the set of circumstances under which a sentence is true, and those under which it is false. These truth-conditions have to be evaluated against a possible or imaginary world, and they are all that constitute the meaning of a sentence (Portner, 2005, pp. 1-27). The truth value of an expression is determined by linguistic meaning only; thus, just knowing the literal meaning of a sentence grants the speaker the ability to decide about its truthfulness. Still, there are sundry examples in which linguistic meaning – and, consequently, truth-conditions – proves context-dependent. In "She loves living here with him", the pronouns "she", "here", and "him" need to be associated to a referent if we were to determine their truth values, and this process does depend on context; in other words, on pragmatic reasoning.

Something similar occurs with gradable adjectives: examine words such as "big" or "cold". It may seem virtually impossible to impose a stringent limit when determining what should be considered sufficiently big or enough cold. Certainly, a person who hails from Andalusia, well accustomed to reach a record high each summer, would almost freeze if they experienced the classic Asturian warmest season, when maximum temperatures do not generally exceed 25ºC. Similarly, what we would claim to be unusually big for the average size of an ant will, undeniably, still feel extremely tiny when compared to the smallest elephant. Gradable adjectives are vague, and they require some standards of comparison that are provided by context.

It can, therefore, be concluded that trying to make a sharp distinction between semantics and pragmatics may not eventually seem as straightforward as early linguistic hypotheses suggested. As it has been previously discussed, both realms are constantly merging and significantly influencing one another, thus definitely proving implausible that semantic meaning should remain completely isolated from contextual features. Otherwise, speakers would never get to know for certain whose attention a monk wants to capture when addressing someone as "brother"; where does she wants to live and with whom – and, obviously, who is that "she"; or what should be deemed as cold, hot, big, or small.

1.1. The Underdeterminacy Thesis

It has been amply demonstrated that, undoubtedly, sometimes what speakers say diverges from what they truly want to communicate, and linguistic meaning usually needs to be complemented with contextual features for it to be complete. Thus, as above-stated, it is worth considering that it is extralinguistic information and speakers' ability to decode messages and infer meaning – as I will be examining in the following chapter – that helps us overcome this *gappy* nature of language. Nevertheless, there are some authors that propose three different levels in utterance meaning; namely, linguistic meaning, what is said, and what is meant (Carston, 2002, pp. 15-30). Albeit I have heretofore been treating the first two without establishing any difference between them, linguist Robyn Carston – assuming a truth-conditional semantics perspective – suggests a further distinction. What Carston propounds is that, apart from the fact that "linguistic meaning underdetermines what is meant [and] what is said underdetermines what is meant" (Carston, 2002, p. 19), it can also be discussed that "linguistic meaning underdetermines what is said" (Carston, 2002, p. 19), and she has labelled this phenomenon as the "underdeterminacy thesis" (Carston, 2002, p. 19). According to her, the conventional, literal meaning which is conveyed by the words used in any given linguistic expression underdetermines what is said; that is, "encoded linguistic meaning falls short of determining the proposition expressed or 'what is said'" (Carston, 2002, p. 18).

Such can be the case of subsentential linguistic expressions which are extremely typical in ordinary talk exchanges. Take, for instance, the following example: imagine a speaker utters "Inside the drawer" when they observe their flatmate looking for the battery charger of the laptop, for it has a dead battery. It is crystal clear that the utterance is not complete whatsoever; more accurate would have been saying something similar to "The battery charger is located inside the drawer" or "Check inside the drawer; I have placed the battery charger there". Thus, the linguistic meaning encoded in the forms employed underdetermines the "what is said"; that is, the utterance is not "fully propositional" (Carston, 2002, p. 17): since it is not semantically complete, it cannot be assigned a truth-value. Something similar happens in "The man with three children with big feet is my uncle": this is arguably a "fully sentential" (Carston, 2002, p. 22) utterance, but it will never be a fully propositional one – namely, an utterance that can be evaluated in truth-conditional terms – until a process of disambiguation has taken place – who has big feet, the man or his three children? Consider now the example of

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"This is my favourite book", an utterance in which we encounter the same problem as in the previous one: it seems to be a fully sentential utterance – for it does not lack any semantic constituent. Nevertheless, it cannot be assigned a truth-value until necessary referents have been assigned to indexical constituents ("this").

The content of the aforementioned utterances – that is, the "what is said" – is, consequently, context-sensitive: since the meaning of their linguistic constituents falls short of the proposition expressed by each of them, they require a process of completion in order to be truth-evaluable, and the said missing information can only be supplied by means of pragmatic processes; in other words, it is provided by context (Carston, 2002, p. 22). Consider now the case of "Sarah is tall". This utterance seems to be both fully sentential and fully propositional; consequently, it will not be necessary to rely on context in order to assign the utterance a truth value, apparently. Nevertheless, scalar adjectives – and scalar terms to a greater extent –, conjunctions, negations, etc. do also need context, since "standards of precision" (Carston, 2002, p. 24) are pragmatically supplied: Sarah may be tall in comparison to the rest of her friends, but she may not be tall enough to be part of the basketball team. Finally, Carston proposes another set of cases in which utterances express such an obvious truth – as could be the example of "The sky is blue" – that speakers and hearers may need some pragmatic processes of adding information in order to make these utterances relevant in a given context (Carston, 2002, pp. 26-27).

Robyn Carston has thus proved a firm advocate of the strong version of essentialism: "underdeterminacy is universal and no sentence ever fully encodes the thought or proposition it is used to express" (Carston, 2002, p. 29). However widespread this view may be, I would assume a weaker version of this thesis for the following reason: I subscribe to the idea that linguistic meaning does underdetermine the proposition expressed by an utterance (the "what is said") in the vast majority of examples, but I would argue that this reasoning may not be applied to the latest set of cases I have just been discussing. Take into account the example of "The sky is blue": as I see it, these types of utterances do not have to be supported by contextual features, and they are both fully sentential and fully propositional. Thus, albeit this distinction is deeply fascinating and merits detailed study, I will continue focusing solely on the saying/meaning distinction for the purpose of this dissertation.

Be it as it may, it has been conclusively demonstrated that there exists a noticeable difference between what is said and what is meant – between sentence or linguistic meaning and utterance or speakers' meaning – and that this gap can be easily solved – at least in the vast majority of cases – by the cooperative nature of human communicative processes I will be exploring in the coming chapter.

2. Basic properties of communication

2.1. The Cooperative Principle and Gricean Maxims

Suppose now that boxer A sardonically wishes "Good luck!" to his chief opponent – boxer B – with whom he does not get along whatsoever. Presumably, this arrogant sportsman is actually implying that his contender will need more than fortune smiling on him that precise moment; that his rival – boxer B – will have to make a strenuous effort in order to defeat him. As it has been formerly shown, there exists a gap between what is said – linguistic meaning – and what is communicated – speaker's meaning –, and both implicatures and inferential processes are crucial in *bridging this gap*. Albeit the term "conversational implicature" (Grice, 1975, p. 49) will be further explored subsequently, it can be described as the implied meaning, one that goes beyond linguistic meaning; videlicet, the "meaning which is intended by the speaker to be understood by the hearer, but [which] is not part of the literal sentence meaning" (Kroeger, 2019, p. 12). In other words, those aspects of the speaker's meaning that are unspoken, yet deliberately conveyed. In fact – unless used ironically –, the expression "Good luck!" in the previous example does not usually serve to express "You are going to lose", but rather exactly the opposite. However, in the aforesaid dialogue, it seems to have clearly conveyed that precise information ("Don't waste your time trying to exert yourself, you are going to be defeated anyways"), and boxer B has readily grasped (i.e. inferred) his opponent's hidden meaning and spiteful intentions; namely, the implicature.

Actually, taking into consideration the haughty, disdainful nature of boxer A, his sincerely wishing luck to a given rival is rather unlikely. Nevertheless, there must be some reason in so doing, and boxer B acknowledges that, by default, his contender is trying to be meaningful in some way (i.e. to cooperate), since "our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks (...) They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). This is what Paul Grice has labelled the "Cooperative Principle" (Grice, 1975, p. 45), which runs as follows:

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1975, 45)

According to Grice (1975, pp. 41-58), in order to conduct a perfectly rational, intelligible talk exchange, all participants should cooperate and assume that each conversational partner is engaging in the verbal interaction in a sincere, worthwhile manner. Additionally, he distinguishes three basic features an effective, cooperative communicative exchange should display:

> [that] the participants have some common immediate aim, (...) [albeit they can] be independent and even in conflict, (...) [that] the contributions of the participants should be dovetailed, mutually dependent, [and that] there is some sort of understanding (which may be explicit but which is often tacit) that (...) the transaction should continue in appropriate style unless both parties are agreeable that it should terminate. (Grice, 1975, p. 48)

The Cooperative Principle is then more precisely specified, and Grice suggests four maxims which are relevant during a talk exchange.

Grice's Maxims of Conversation (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46)

a) **Maxim of Quantity**: relates to the quantity of information to be provided.
   1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
   2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
b) **Maxim of Quality**: try to make your contribution one that is true.
   1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
   2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
c) **Relation** (or Relevance): be relevant.
d) **Manner**: be perspicuous.
   1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
   2. Avoid ambiguity.
   3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
   4. Be orderly.

Grice (1975, pp. 41-58) upholds that speakers may or may not observe (i.e. obey) the aforementioned maxims during a verbal interaction – thus giving rise to conversational implicatures – but still be communicative if – and only if – the addressee assumes that their counterpart is trying to be cooperative. Grice thus differentiates four ways in which a speaker may "fail to fulfill" (Grice, 1975, p. 49) the said maxims. To begin with, a maxim may be violated and the speaker deliberately intending to mislead the hearer. On the contrary, the speaker might face a case of conflict between maxims; that is, a special circumstance in which the complete fulfilment of a given maxim inevitably entails the

violation of a different maxim (Grice, 1975, p. 49). In order to exemplify this, it is worth considering the following dialogue:

> Mother: With whom did your sister go to the cinema?
> Son: With some friends.

Two possible situations can derive from the child's response. Firstly, suppose that the offspring is actually well aware of his sister's walking companion, but he intentionally decides not to give his mother this information, maybe because he knows that she seriously considers her daughter's friends a bad influence, so he assumes she will reprimand his sister and, therefore, he is wittingly hiding information and being deliberately vague in his answer. Were this to be the case, the child would be intentionally violating the maxim of Quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as is required" [Grice, 1975, p. 45]), since he has much more knowledge but opts to conceal it. Conversely, imagine now that he truly does not have more information: his sister has just shouted "I'm going out!" and soon thereafter she has shut the door without providing her little brother with any other details. By replying to his mother "With some friends", there is no reason to presuppose that he is deliberately violating the first maxim of Quantity and that he is trying to hide some kind of information, although he is deeply conscious of being less informative than required. This infringement can be justified if we assume the child is acquainted with the fact that being more informative would lead to the transgression of the maxim of Quality ("Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" [Grice, 1975, p. 46]).

Speakers may also infringe maxims by deciding to "opt out" (Grice, 1975, p. 49) from the Cooperative Principle and blatantly show that they are not willing to cooperate, for example by saying something similar to "I cannot say more; my lips are sealed" (Grice, 1975, p. 49), or "Do not ask me, I will not tell you". Finally, participants in a given talk exchange may "flout a maxim" (Grice, 1975, p. 49): they conspicuously infringe a maxim with the intention of generating a conversational implicature and thus be meaningful, as long as the hearer realises the speaker is still cooperating in the communicative exchange and manages to extract the implied meaning (i.e. the implicature), as occurs in the aforesaid example involving the two boxers. In such cases, Grice upholds that "the maxim is being exploited" (1975, p. 49). The following examples of rhetoric figures may serve as an illustration of this pattern of reasoning.

Take into account hyperbolic expressions such as "If you leave me, I'll die". Never has anybody passed away on account of love – and the speaker is well aware of that –, so they are intentionally lying, thus flouting the maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false" [Grice, 1975, p. 46]). This expression is, therefore, uttered for the purpose of emphasis, in order to sound more dramatic and, probably, to inspire a sense of pity in whom, from now onwards, has become an ex-partner.

Something similar occurs with irony, as in the case of a father telling his daughter "I love when you misbehave in front of our friends". Clearly, the speaker is not being truthful, since he actually hates being publicly embarrassed because of his daughter's improper conduct, so he is also flouting the maxim of Quality, but he is still being meaningful, as it is evident for a competent speaker that the real meaning of his words is actually "I detest when you misbehave in front of our friends". Another further representative example of this kind of implicatures may arise when, for instance, a woman asks her boyfriend about his birthday present. He might respond something such as "Mmmm, my favourite group is on tour this summer". Apparently, he has completely deviated from the conversational topic, thus transgressing the maxim of Relation ("Be relevant" [Grice, 1975, p. 46]) and, in fact, he has actually done so. However, he is still cooperating and being meaningful, for he has clearly implied that a pair of tickets for one of their concerts would be the perfect gift, expecting his girlfriend to reasonably infer it.

Thus, it has been evidenced that conversational implicatures – which mainly arise when a maxim is flouted – are extremely common in daily life usage. However, neo-Griceans argued that the previously-mentioned four maxims and nine sub-maxims could easily be reduced to a sole principle, and cognitive scientists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson proposed the Principle of Relevance and the Relevance Theory (1986) as an alternative to Grice's Cooperative Principle. According to them, human cognition tends to assume that every utterance is supposed to be relevant on the mere fact that a speaker has ostensively initiated an act of communication. Subsequently, addressees automatically try to obtain the speaker's intended meaning, aiming to maximise its relevance (Ariel, 2010, pp. 135-144). In an imaginary world, Peter offers Mary a freshly-brewed cup of coffee and she instantly answers: "Coffee would keep me awake". Peter, thanks to his knowledge of the world, is acutely conscious of caffeine making it difficult to get to sleep. Hence, Peter has to decide whether or not his friend has the intention to rest. Aware of the fact that Mary should take a flight first thing in

the morning, Peter knows that, were Mary to take the said cup of coffee, she would not sleep enough, so he infers that, by replying "Coffee would keep me awake", Mary is actually rejecting his offer. Our inferential mechanisms tend to spontaneously process utterances in the most efficient way so as to make the right inferences. Thus, both the Relevance Theory and Grice's Maxims of Conversation help explain the way speakers cooperate pragmatically during a talk exchange.

The cooperative nature of communication, however, does not rely uniquely on the participants' assumption of the relevance of every utterance, and on their willingness to disambiguate linguistic expressions and to reconstruct messages in the most successful way. Rather, the Cooperative Principle is complemented with those pieces of information which are not explicitly verbalized but tacitly shared by both addressors and addresses (i.e. the notion of common ground that will be analysed in the following section), and with the own multimodality of language, which proves essential in the construction and subsequent decoding of utterances in everyday talk exchanges.

2.2. The notion of common ground

When interacting, participants in a given communicative exchange usually have some rooted information about each other's properties, "a form of [analogous] self-awareness" (Clark, 1996, p. 120) known as "common ground" (Clark, 1996, p. 92). This shared, assumed information may act as a double-edged sword during a talk exchange: not only does it allow the addressee to easily work on the message in order to reconstruct it in the most successful way, but it also helps addressors anticipate receivers' interpretation of the said message, so that there is no need to fully verbalize the linguistic expression (Dik, 1997, pp. 8-11). Addressees are thus supposed to be able to fill the gaps they might encounter all throughout the message thanks to the common ground established between speakers. Clark proposes, thereby, three different representations of common ground, the first one (known as "CG-shared" [Clark, 1996, p. 94]) upholding the following:

> *p* is common ground for members of community C if and only if: 1. every member of C has information that basis *b* holds; 2. *b* indicates to every member of C that every member of C has information that *b* holds; 3. *b* indicates to members of C that *p*. (Lewis, 1969, cited in Clark, 1996, p. 94)

Suppose Susan is preparing a surprise birthday party for the come of age of Tom, her classmate, so she decides to summon the whole class but for John, Tom's ex-best friend, who has recently betrayed him. Taking into account the said main premises, it is crystal clear for everybody that: 1) for it is a surprise party, by no means should guests let Tom know about it; 2) as the celebration is also a private get-together, those classmates who have been invited are not supposed to bring with them anybody else who is not one of their fellow students; 3) obviously, that the Tom Susan is actually referring to is their mutual friend, and not any other Tom they may also be acquainted with, and 4) since everybody else is well aware of the glaring discrepancies that have recently arisen between Tom and John, the latter will not be invited to the event. The forenamed enumeration comprises the common ground of the guests; in other words, rooted information each participant is aware of.

Common ground is also reflexive; in other words, "it must include that very awareness itself" (Clark, 1996, p. 120): that is, each guest has the aforesaid information (i.e. conditions 1, 2, 3, and 4) and, in turn, knows that the rest of those who have been invited also share that same information. Finally, common ground is "iterated" (Clark, 1996, p. 95): on the basis of the previous example, imagine now that Susan tells her mother about the said plan. Consequently, Susan's female parent will be aware of the fact that her daughter is aware of the party and the bitter quarrel. Now suppose that Susan's mother informs, in turn, her own mother – Susan's grandmother – about the event and the entire situation. Then, Susan's grandmother will be aware that her daughter is aware that her granddaughter is aware... and so on *ad infinitum*, which is not what actually occurs in everyday talk exchanges whatsoever, and this is the reason why, of these three representations, the latter ("CG-iterated" [Clark, 1996, p. 95]) is conceived as a mental representation only. Lewis upholds "that this is a chain of implications, not of steps in anyone's actual reasoning. Therefore, there is nothing improper about its infinite length" (1969, p. 53, cited in Clark, 1996, p. 99).

Thus, common ground does not rely on individual representations, but rather on "mutual belief[s]" (Clark, 1996, p. 94) speakers share. Nevertheless, common ground needs to be created specifically for every given communicative exchange (Clark, 1996, p. 116). In so doing, participants may make use of two types of shared bases; namely, "*communal common ground* (...) [and] *personal common ground*" (Clark, 1996, p. 100). The former is intimately related to that evidence people infer depending on the cultural communities each conversational partner belongs to (Clark, 1996, p. 100). Thus, were I

to establish a dialogue with an American student, I assume she has some knowledge about US history; she will comment on "shared expertise" (Clark, 1996, p. 102) and "ineffable background" (Clark, 1996, p. 110) other communities lack – take, for instance, 9/11 – and "cultural facts, norms, [and] procedures" (Clark, 1996, p. 108) that might radically differ from Spanish ones, or she may even have "communal lexicons" (Clark, 1996, p. 107) that deviate from the Spanish conventional meaning. Conversely, speakers may also employ personal common ground so as to create shared bases that derive from "perceptual experiences and joint actions" (Clark, 1996, p. 112), and personal acquaintance – talking being the quintessential example. Each piece of common ground can be subsequently evaluated for quality; thus, some of them prove more evident than others (Clark, 1996, pp. 110-111). Bear in mind the example I have just studied dealing with a social gathering: in that case, the fact that a surprise party should not be unveiled to the birthday boy may be much more conspicuous for everybody than the argument between Tom and John.

Hence, common ground can be said to be unavoidable in successful communicative exchanges: based on the principle of economy, it serves both the speaker and the hearer to construct and reconstruct messages, respectively, in the most productive way. In addition, it also provides participants with extremely useful information which is not usually encoded in the literal meaning of those linguistic expressions employed in everyday verbal interactions, and so does the multi-modal nature of human language I will be exploring in the next section.

2.3. Multi-modal language

The "primary niche of [human] language" (Perniss, 2018, p. 1) is face-to-face interactions, communicative exchanges in which participants – as I have just explored – cooperate in order to communicate in a successful, intelligible, and informative way. However, cooperative efforts do not depend exclusively on speech as early linguists proposed, since "simple utterances are rarely interpreted at face value" (Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 2). Rather, they rely on context, common ground, and – as researchers in linguistic pragmatics have recently proved – on gestures, "prosodic information" (Perniss, 2018, p. 2), facial expressions, and mutual gaze as well; that is, aspects of communication that have hitherto been studied apart from language *per se*, since many scientists have heretofore been following the Chomskyan paradigm, thus focussing on

the linguistic code exclusively (Perniss, 2018, pp. 1-5). According to authors such as Levinson and Holler (2014, pp. 1-9), and Perniss (2018, pp. 1-5), the unrivalled complexity of human language is arguably the result of a phylogenetic process that has derived in human language being a system of systems, a multi-modal system: a stratified, layered structure whose levels, despite having been sequentially accumulated all throughout history, do constantly intertwine, thereby ultimately complementing one another – yet, gesture systems seem to predate vocal production, biologically speaking.

It has been argued that the emergence of spoken language dates back to the times of the *Homo heidelbergensis*, coinciding with the incipience of voluntary breathing (Dediu & Levinson, 2013, pp. 1-17, cited in Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 2). According to Levinson & Holler (2014, pp. 1-9), given the late development of speech it seems logical to conclude that one of the earliest layers of the stratified system that comprises human language could have been non-linguistic signals – albeit "co-occurring simple vocalizations may have rapidly emerged" (Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 5); that is to say, premature instances of intentional communication may have been satisfactorily performed by means of iconic and indexical gestures which subsequently evolved and that we, together with a phylogenetically enriched complex vocalization system, have eventually inherited. The forenamed gestures required the capability to predict a desired course of action in order to be eventually ritualized from ethological action sequences that had previously proved successful – in a fairly similar way turn-taking occurs in face-to-face verbal interactions. From them all, it is worth highlighting declarative pointing, nonce signals, or sign language just to cite but a few examples, albeit one of the most pivotal roles assumed by gestures has to do with their iconicity nature, especially with regard to spatial relations, which proved paramount to human cognition (Levinson & Holler, 2014, pp. 1-9).

Despite having evolved in a stratified way – adding further layers to the already-established ones – this initial assemblage Levinson labelled as the "interaction engine" (2006, cited in Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 3), together with the development of complex speech (Levinson & Holler, 2014, pp. 1-9), has resulted in a single integrated system – namely, the "multi-modal [system of] language" (Perniss, 2018, p. 1) –, which is what constitutes human language. A significant amount of scientific evidence serves to back up these claims: first and foremost, it has been amply demonstrated that gestural modality and vocal production are closely related within the brain, especially in the organization of the human motor cortex, and both linguistic and non-linguistic signals

are processed simultaneously. Similarly, we tend to gesture intricate facial movements that usually accompany activities requiring a certain degree of concentration. Moreover, the mouth-hands intimate connection can be evidenced as well when holding a telephonic conversation: we still gesticulate frequently despite being well aware of the fact that our conversational partner cannot actually perceive our body language. In addition, cognitive scientists have evinced that those areas of the human brain which are principal in language processing correspond to areas in the monkey brain dealing with manual gesture (Levinson & Holler, 2014, pp. 1-9).

Consequently, it seems fairly evident that there exists a close marriage between spoken and signed languages; a careful assemblage that helps participants in contexts of face-to-face interaction build utterances. Thus, human beings find it easy to constantly shift from the vocal to the visual channel when required, since they repeatedly complement and adapt to one another (Levinson and Holler, 2014, pp. 1-9). Moreover, it has been further proposed that "when preventing people from using gestures (...) speech becomes hesitant, further corroborating the assumption of gestures being integral to the human language system" (Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 6).

It can be concluded that the ideas discussed in this chapter neatly illustrate that there is a broad difference between linguistic meaning and speaker's meaning, and that the linguistic code merely results insufficient in narrowing the substantial gap that separates what is said – that is to say, the literal meaning of a linguistic expression – from what is communicated – namely, the meaning which is not encoded in the words themselves, but rather incorporated by the speaker. Hence, not only does the multimodality of language prove essential for a communicative exchange to be highly effective and successful, but the existence of mutually-shared bases between the speaker and the receiver, and the participants' cooperation during verbal interactions are also of the utmost importance when trying to communicate efficiently. In the following section I will be studying some case examples which are worth analysing from a pragmatic point of view, since they show how communication may sometimes result utterly futile when participants fail to combine the aforementioned elements.

3. Language and communication: case studies

All throughout my dissertation, I have been trying to demonstrate that, actually, human communication does not depend on encoded linguistic meaning solely: as above-stated, for a talk exchange to be as efficacious as possible, the linguistic code usually needs to operate in conjunction with context, the participants' cooperation in a given communicative exchange, the own multi-modal nature of language, and the common ground shared by both the addressor and the addressee. Otherwise, communication may fail. To further verify this universal social phenomenon, I will be analysing four videos in order to illustrate how successful communication would presumably be more difficult if speakers dispense with any of the said constituents.

The first clip has been extracted from a TV series – *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) – and it intends to show how communicative exchanges sometimes require the combination of semantic meaning, multimodality, and mutually-shared bases between the speaker and the receiver for it to be absolutely effective. The second sketch, on the other hand, has been taken from an American comedy – *Role Models* (2008) – and its primary aim is to demonstrate how, despite combining the linguistic code with gestures and prosodic information, communication might result fruitless if both participants do not share certain pieces of rooted information. The third scene, conversely, has been selected from another comedy-drama film – titled *A Thousand Words* (2012) – and, together with the last video – which corresponds to a *Samsung* commercial promoting a high-definition, smart television – they will serve me to demonstrate how, in spite of sharing common ground, gestures may not be enough when trying to communicate properly if they do not operate in conjunction with language.

3.1. Case study 1

This first sketch[1] illustrates the importance assumed by the marriage between the linguistic code, the own multimodality of language, and the common ground built between the speaker and the receiver in a fully effective communicative exchange. The excerpt shows an ordinary, friendly dialogue extracted directly from *The Big Bang Theory*, an American sitcom created by Bill Prady and Chuck Lorre which premiered in 2007 and concluded in 2019. The comedy skit revolves around two communicative

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[1] The sketch can be accessed in Sharepoint by clicking here.

exchanges: the first dialogue is held between Dr. Sheldon Cooper and Penny – two neighbours who eventually become intimates – and the second one between Sheldon and his friend and flatmate Leonard (an experimental physicist). The former is an outstanding, rational theoretical physicist whose intelligence quotation – the origin of his hubris and egocentricity – is distinctly superior to his friends'. Nevertheless, he suffers from some personality disorders, such as unsociability, a sheer lack of empathy, and a remarkable incapacity for noticing instances of irony – some behavioural symptoms which are par for the course in people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. This fragment will serve to neatly illustrate how making use of just the linguistic code during a communicative exchange proves clearly insufficient when trying to communicate satisfactorily, more specifically in dialogues such as the above-stated, where sarcasm – a subtype of verbal irony – occupies such a crucial role.

Typically, "what the speaker of an ironical utterance intends to get across is the opposite of what he has literally said" (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, p. 296). However, for a sarcastic message to be fully recognised as such, linguistic cues normally need to operate in conjunction with sundry non-verbal signals; namely, prosodic information, gestures, or facial expressions. Nonetheless, little scientific research has heretofore been conducted so as to explore the specific vocal markers of sarcasm and, albeit experts have not come to a satisfactory conclusion yet – primarily on account of differences among methods employed, age, gender, bias, and languages studied – Rockwell (2000) proposed that some acoustic features that tend to characterise sarcastic utterances are "slow tempo, low pitch level (...) and increased intensity [that is, great loudness]" (p. 486). Similarly, speakers who are producing ironical utterances are generally more inclined to perform "expressive movements (that is, intentional, nonspeech-related movements)" (Rockwell, 2001, p. 49) such as gestures, movements with the mouth and eyebrows or wry faces that blatantly exhibit the senders' desire to signal the sarcasm conveyed in their utterances, thus helping receivers notice it in order to fully comprehend the message.

In the forenamed case study, Dr. Sheldon Cooper, meaning to be sarcastic, conspicuously flouts Grice's maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false" [Grice, 1975, p. 46]) on three different occasions: 1) when he denies being interested in eventually mastering sarcasm, for he actually means exactly the opposite; 2) when he praises Penny's culinary arts, since he admits having been sarcastic in so doing, and 3) when he finally apologises to Leonard for having previously misbehaved.

According to Grice (1975, pp. 41-58), speakers may fail to observe the Maxims of Conversation – in the same way as Sheldon does – but still be communicative. However, communication will only prove completely effective if, and only if, the receiver correctly understands the communicative purpose of the addressor. Otherwise, the talk exchange will misfire, which is what actually happens in each of the following examples.

During the dialogue between Dr. Cooper and Penny there are, arguably, no substantial prosodic variations in Sheldon's speech (i.e. significant alterations in intonation, pitch, tempo, stress patterns...) which may ultimately help his listener easily distinguish his ironical message from actual honest utterances. In like manner, no remarkable physiological movements that might convey sarcasm are observable during the exchange, thus making it utterly impossible for Penny to perceive the irony encoded in Sheldon's words. The consequence of the physicist failing to combine semantic meaning – literal, linguistic meaning – with prosody and gestures (i.e. multimodal language) is a failed exchange, since Penny ends up asking for repair (for she feels somewhat bewildered when Sheldon gainsays her remarks answering with a categorical "No" to her question "You know how you're always trying to learn about sarcasm?") and being easily deceived (since she actually believes Sheldon when he congratulates her for the freshly-brewed cocoa by saying "Thank you for the delicious cocoa"). Linguistic code proving insufficient, the communicative exchange results unsuccessful, since Penny has not ultimately grasped Sheldon's communicative intentions.

Something similar occurs throughout the second part of the sketch, when Dr. Cooper apologises to Leonard. It is important to note that there is no need for them to revisit the reasons for Sheldon's apologies – namely, having challenged his colleague's leadership and tried to sabotage their ambitious project: a new app that makes use of handwriting recognition in order to help users solve differential equations and which they were on the verge of developing together with their friends Raj (an astrophysicist) and Howard (an engineer) – for they are already part of the mutual bases they share (i.e. their personal common ground). Nevertheless, the absence of non-verbal signals such as "acoustic cues" (Perniss, 2018, p. 3) and facial expressions which characterise sarcastic utterances leads Leonard – oblivious to Sheldon's original intention behind his insincere regrets – to take Sheldon's words literally ("Before you begin, let me say again how deeply sorry I am for my earlier behaviour and how much I respect and admire your leadership"). Unable to detect any trace of irony, Leonard assumes Dr. Cooper is being

totally honest and ends up pardoning him. Therefore, it can be said that, in the light of the foregoing, this last dialogue is another instance of a failed verbal interaction, since Leonard has not managed to understand Sheldon's original communicative purposes.

What differs from the previous dialogues comes next: the last part of the sketch shows Sheldon winking an eye at Penny soon thereafter having said sorry to Leonard. The personal common ground both Sheldon and Penny had previously created – that Dr. Cooper would apologise to Leonard but only sarcastically in order to make amends with him – proves crucial so as to comprehend the said gesture. In other words, Sheldon utters a message (an insincere apology) which is literally understood by Leonard. However, just by blinking his eye at Penny (i.e. by making use of the multi-modal nature of language), Sheldon is actually indicating to her that his statement should not be interpreted *verbatim*. Rather, he may be conveying something similar to "I have successfully put our previously-devised plan into operation". In this case, where the talk exchange encompasses the linguistic code, common ground, and multimodality, communication results complete and perfectly effective, for Penny did fully grasp Sheldon's true communicative intentions.

3.2. Case study 2

In order to illustrate how communication may eventually prove fruitless due to the absence of mutually-shared bases between the speaker and the receiver it is worth considering this short clip[2] extracted from *Role Models*, an American comedy directed by David Wain and released in the United States in 2008. The film, which is starred by Paul Rudd (Danny), Seann William Scott (Wheeler), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (Augie), Bobb'e J. Thompson (Ronnie), and Elizabeth Banks (Beth), revolves around the faux pas of two salesmen, Danny and Wheeler, who end up being sentenced to 150 hours of community service so as to avoid up to 30 days' imprisonment after having committed a number of indictable offences. As opposed to Wheeler – who loves his job promoting energy drinks –, Danny feels rather miserable, resentful, and deeply frustrated with his current life. This excerpt – which has been taken from the very beginning of the film – well serves to clearly exemplify how a communicative exchange may ultimately misfire on account of a notable lack of common ground between speaker and receiver.

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[2] The sketch can be accessed in Sharepoint by clicking here.

The scene shows an ordinary transaction performed by Danny and his girlfriend Beth at a cafeteria. Nevertheless, what should have been a quotidian, unproblematic order ends in a bitter quarrel between the merchant and the barista: in spite of both of them being thoroughly familiar with the expected course of standard, simple procedures that are usually followed at a cafe (i.e. communal common ground), what is to be encountered in this case study is a clear example of "false consensus effect" (Ross et al., 1977, cited in Clark, 1996, p. 111); that is, a natural tendency to erroneously presuppose that our conversational partner knows the same as we do – that we share a mutual belief.

As above-stated, there are a number of joint actions which are likely to take place in a situation of the said characteristics: in the first place, it is worth considering that once somebody enters a cafe, they will immediately assume a given role. In this case, both Danny and Beth adopt the role of customers. As clients, they are supposed to 1) be able to afford their order, 2) be rather thirsty, 3) want to be served as soon as possible, and 4) approach the barista so as to order a drink – just to cite but a few examples. Following the expected routine actions, the waitress – presuming their intentions almost automatically – will subsequently proceed to assist her customers. These are some of the aspects that constitute the set of cultural procedures which are usually adopted in this particular commercial context and which, in turn, are supposed to be part of the mutually-shared bases of the participants in the communicative exchange.

Besides, it is noteworthy how both Danny and Beth have decided to approach that precise woman instead of anybody else. The reason for so doing is a direct consequence of the "evidence of community membership" (Clark, 1996, p. 117) displayed by the barista, which is also paramount in building common ground: by wearing a uniform bearing the distinctive logo of the company *Coffee Xpress* and on account of her position in the scene – that is, standing right behind the counter – she is publicly manifesting – "provid[ing] recognizable evidence for h[er] and those [s]he meets" (Clark, 1996, p. 117) – that she is actually part of a specific community – the body of employees at *Coffee Xpress*. By the same token, just by entering the said cafe, Danny immediately becomes a member of a precise cultural group, that of customers at *Coffee Xpress* – thus, the recognition of cultural communities is equally crucial in establishing communal common ground.

Consequently, the barista – after having identified Danny and Beth as clients of *Coffee Xpress* – does immediately take for granted that the salesman is well aware of the "communal lexicon" (Clark, 1996, p. 107) – the specialised, conventional jargon –

spoken at *Coffee Xpress* and, more accurately, the peculiar names given to the different coffee sizes in this particular cafe chain. Therefore, she will assume that Danny is familiar with the term coined for a large coffee at *Coffee Xpress*: *venti – twenty* in Italian –, since the cup is twenty ounces. Nevertheless, the waitress has completely erred on her assumptions, for Danny appears to be ignorant of the said nickname. Accordingly, there seems to be no justifiable reason for Danny to have expected that a server at a cafe would not readily understand him when simply referring to his *venti* as a large black coffee. Hence, it can be concluded that the absence of common ground and mutual beliefs between speaker and listener ultimately prevents communication: the inevitable, unfortunate result of wrongly presuming that certain information is shared by both the addressor and the addressee would lead to a failed talk exchange, a complete misunderstanding that, in this case, lamentably caused the disagreement to escalate.

3.3. Case studies 3 and 4

The following example[3] is quite similar to the preceding one. However, the aim in this case is to demonstrate how merely making use of body movements, facial expressions, and gestures may prove insufficient so as to properly communicate. The video has been taken from *A Thousand Words*, an American comedy-drama film released in 2012, directed by Brian Robbins, and starred by Eddie Murphy. This latter interprets the role of Jack McCall, a literary agent who tends to deceive his clients in order to arrange the most lucrative deals. As punishment for his trickeries, a mysterious Bodhi Tree suddenly grows in his backyard the night he signs an agreement with Dr. Sinja, a self-help guru. As a result, he ends up being under a curse: a leaf will fall off the Bodhi tree for every word he utters; once the sacred fig is completely bare, McCall will die. The hex will only be ended once he mends all of his strained relationships.

The scene I have selected clearly illustrates the importance assumed by the linguistic code in a successful communicative exchange. The sketch shows Jack McCall ordering his daily coffee at *Starbucks*. In this sense, the clip is closely analogous to the previous one, for both of them portray a usual transaction at a cafeteria. In like manner, the participants of both situations are expected to be perfectly familiar with the usual procedures followed at a cafe – and indeed they are: as it has been previously explored, each partaker would adequately fulfil a specific role (either server or customer) and

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[3] The sketch can be accessed in Sharepoint by clicking here.

occupy a precise location in the scene; the client is supposed to comply with a number of basic requirements, and so is the barista, etc. However, the difference between these two cases lies in the way communication is established: what prevented an effective communicative exchange in the comedy skit belonging to *Role Models* was the obvious lack of common ground between the addressor and the addressee. On the contrary, what greatly hinders a fruitful interaction in *A thousand Words* is the total absence of verbal communication: on account of his being cursed, the literary agent has sensibly decided to stop talking; thus, he can only communicate through non-linguistic cues, including mouth gestures, mutual gaze, facial expressions, and corporal movements – performed mainly with the hands.

To begin with, Jack McCall appears flashing the waiter a warm smile that clearly displays courtesy and his desire to be served and order a drink. Yearning for a three-shot coffee, he subsequently starts pointing with his index finger at the board where the different types of coffees and desserts are explained. In so doing, the barista "is meant not to look at the finger, but in the vector indicated beyond the finger, and find some referent" (Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 3), the menu in this case, which is what the literary agent wants to draw the waiter's attention to. Moreover, McCall deploys a number of iconic, "*ad hoc* gestural symbols" (Levinson & Holler, 2014, p. 4), primarily in order to depict the size and shape of his favourite coffee. Besides, he also makes conspicuously use of some gestures and body movements that mimic the act of shooting, dying, and drinking a cup of coffee. Nonetheless, these will not be readily understood by the barista until the end of the transaction.

Something similar occurs in this *Samsung* commercial[4] in which a new Smart TV is promoted. One of the most outstanding technological innovations included in the said television is the fact that it can be controlled with the user's hands, thus utterly disregarding the remote control. The device recognises the gestures made by its owner, and the two main movements are waving – so as to move the pointer throughout the screen – and opening and closing the fist – in order to select and open applications. The advertisement exhibits a young girl watching a film in her motion-controlled TV and in front of her neighbours. Hence, when she waves at the screen and tries to turn the volume up and down, she actually seems to be greeting and inviting to her flat those

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[4] The sketch can be accessed in Sharepoint by clicking here.

who live nearby who, in turn, wrongly interpret her gestures and end up understanding that she may be sexually interested in any of them.

According to Levinson & Holler, "without speech, the gestural modality is able to take over much of the communicative burden" (2014, p. 6) – and, in fact, it is: take, for instance, the action of begging pardon or a non-linguistic request for passing somebody the salt at the table, which may simply consist in a slight movement with the head or hand. Nevertheless, in the light of the above and taking into consideration these specific sketches, it can be argued that gestures and movements such as the aforementioned may sometimes be ultimately insufficient if they do not operate in conjunction with language. The reason behind this phenomenon amounts to the fact that physiological, "spontaneously produced co-speech gestures" (Wolf et al., 2017, p. 3), as well as the vast majority of movements speakers produce in everyday communicative exchanges usually lack the degree of conventionality which indeed characterises the linguistic code (i.e. words), emblematic gestures, and the manual sign language used by the deaf and the mute (Wolf et al. 2017, pp. 1-19). Consequently, signals which might not be as conventional as the aforesaid ones may not absolutely guarantee full communication.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have been trying to evince how a fruitful, completely effective communicative exchange may ultimately prove one of the most extraordinarily complicated ethological processes of the human being. In contrast with what early hypotheses suggested, language – which seems to be what greatly differentiates human from animal communication – should not be completely isolated from extralinguistic information: since the linguistic code underdetermines what is meant, the realms of semantics and pragmatics need to be constantly merging and directly influencing each other in both utterance construction and reconstruction.

However, not only does human communication rely on language and contextually-supplied information, but it also very much depends on the willingness of the participants in a communicative exchange to cooperate. In so doing, speakers assume that their conversational partner is trying to be meaningful in a sincere, worthwhile manner in order to communicate successfully. Similarly, I have also demonstrated the crucial role assumed by common ground – that is, those pieces of rooted information which are mutually shared by both the addressor and the addressee – during an efficacious verbal interaction, and I have illustrated as well how the own multimodal nature of human language – including co-speech gestures, body movements, prosody, and facial expressions that usually co-occur with the linguistic code – becomes paramount in order to hold an effective talk exchange.

Consequently, the principal purpose of this dissertation has been demonstrating how, albeit human communication can – perfectly and successfully – be established by making use of the linguistic code uniquely or merely by displaying manual, conventionalised signs that may be readily recognised and interpreted by the receiver, it is also possible to find instances of communicative exchanges that may ultimately misfire – such as the ones I have already analysed – if speakers happen to dispense with any of the above-stated fundamental aspects that ultimately comprise human communication. Therefore, it can be argued that the most fruitful communicative exchange may be the one that successfully encompasses all of the forenamed constituents.

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