Reconstruction

In “Ambiguity Avoidance is Overrated”, Wasow is interested in explaining why people violate the supposed a priori argument that people should avoid ambiguity. On pages 12 and 13, Wasow discusses a particular example from Piantadosi, et al. (YEAR) discussing how an efficient language should not convey more information than is needed in an utterance, and why this is a reason that people may not try to avoid ambiguity. Typically the context of an utterance contains a lot of information that a listener can use to have a good understanding of what the speaker is talking about. If this is the case, then adding information to disambiguate an utterance that would only be ambiguous out of context is unnecessary for both speakers and listeners.

Therefore, avoiding ambiguity in cases like these is unnecessary. This fits how people typically speak to one another, and explains why the ambiguity of sentences that fit into a specific context is not a problem in the overall understanding of what a speaker meant.

Analysis

In this argument, Wasow uses both the example from Piantadosi as well as a reference to the Gricean maxim of Quantity (don’t have extraneous detail in your utterances) to show a disconnect between the Gricean maxim “avoid ambiguity” and the actual way that people converse and often times violate this maxim. Wasow uses inductive reasoning to connect the ideas of Piantadosi and Grice as well as to provide support for the idea that people will not try to avoid ambiguity of an utterance when it is disambiguated in its fuller context. Each part of his argument builds on the part before it, and together they all provide a solid base for him to infer that people don’t actually avoid ambiguity in practice because this would create extraneous
information where it isn’t needed (instead of letting context disambiguate an utterance). This argument flows quite nicely because every part fits in with what comes before it and after it, and so there is no extraneous information (which is fitting given the topic of the paragraph).

Comment

Wasow’s argument provides a good basis for understanding why people do not try to avoid ambiguity when they are having a conversation. To further expand on the ideas that were presented in this argument, one may be interested in exactly what might make an utterance more informative than it needs to be. I would consider an utterance that is as informative as it needs to be one that is understood a vast majority of the time by both a speaker and listener in a specific context. However, perhaps adding more information would make it so that an utterance could be completely unambiguous and listeners would never misunderstand what the speaker means? This would not be an efficient strategy at all in terms of communication. Over time people would waste more time and energy making sure they were never ambiguous than the amount of time that would be wasted by having to clarify a sentence further on the rare occasion that for some reason a listener didn’t understand an utterance in a specific context.

Another part of Wasow’s argument I would like to expand on is the idea that ambiguous sentences are disambiguated when put into their proper context. I think the idea of this point is correct but I do not agree with the way it is presented. Utterances that make sense in their full context are not ambiguous, but we can create ambiguity by taking it out of context. The paper is called “Ambiguity Avoidance is Overrated”, and I find it untrue to say that people who do not try to disambiguate an utterance in its context are therefore not avoiding ambiguity. If ambiguity is only there when one creates it by taking away context, I would argue that it doesn’t exist in context, therefore there is no reason to avoid it.
Appendix

Standard Form Reconstruction

P1. To make language communication as efficient as possible, one should omit unnecessary information.

P2. Context of an utterance typically provides the listener with a good background of information about what a speaker is most likely talking about without adding extraneous information to the utterance.

P3. Sentences taken out of context which appear ambiguous can be disambiguated by putting them in their proper context.

C. Speakers will not avoid ambiguity of an utterance by adding information that will disambiguate the utterance because such information is extraneous when the utterance can be disambiguated by context.

Comment Reconstruction

P1. Language would be much less efficient if extraneous details were added to every utterance to make sure that listeners never misinterpret a speaker.

P2. Time would be saved if speakers only occasionally had to clarify what they meant, in the case of a misunderstanding, instead of making sure that their utterances are completely clear every time.

P3. An utterance that makes sense in context which becomes ambiguous out of context will not be avoided by speakers because, in its context, ambiguity does not exist.

Comment [9]: Very nicely done!

Comment [10]: I think there is an ambiguity in 'ambiguity' here that is potentially problematic for Wasow.
C. Wasow’s argument about why people don’t try to avoid ambiguity is basically right in the case of utterances that are ambiguous out of context but not in context.

GRADE: 95/100

This is a first-class piece of work. You do a fine job of supplying a focused Recon, and your Analysis provides helpful insight into how the argument is supposed to work. The Comment also conveys a point that I think is crucial to understanding what is up with Wasow. This is an impressive and clear example of what I’m after in these essays. Excellent work!

Michael