The effects of salience on what is said

Keith Allan

http://profiles.arts.monash.edu.au/keith-allan

This brief note offers a few comments on 'The effect of salience on shaping speaker's utterance' (*ESSSU*) by Istvan Kecskes. The main point of Kecskes' paper is to claim that what is said (written, signed), υ (my symbol, not his), is not only modified by 'recipient design', i.e. by concern for maximum comprehensibility to the audience, H, but is also conditioned by egocentric pre-occupations of the speaker (writer, signer), S, – what Kecskes refers to as 'individual salience'. If I interpret Kecskes' paper correctly, 'salience' equates with what is uppermost in S's mind at the moment of utterance. This reflects Rachel Giora's definition of salience.

> It relates to the entrenchment status of stored meanings at a given time in a given community or, more precisely, in the mind of a specific individual, affected by exposure – that is by such factors as familiarity, conventionality, and frequency of occurrence. It predicts that meanings an individual is highly familiar with will always be activated automatically in the mind of that individual, irrespective of contextual information. (Giora 2003: 34)

> Salience then is relative to an individual. What is foremost on one's mind need not necessarily be foremost on another's. Two individuals may be differently affected by the same text. (ibid. 37)

It seems to me that 'recipient design' is the default in social interaction. A default is the fall-back state: what qualifies a state to become the default is its salience in the absence of any contextual motivation to prefer another. Here, 'contextual motivation' comprehends cognitive and emotional impetus (see Allan 2016 (unpublished)). Because of the ubiquity of language interaction among human beings it is most probable that our cognitive and social behaviour in language exchange is largely automatic and rarely consciously and deliberately planned. S and H automatically assume that the optimal means for S to get a message across in υ and, concomitantly, for H to understand υ is for each interlocutor to put themselves into the other's shoes. Hence, even though it is necessarily the case that what S utters is based on S's own knowledge and perspectives there is normally no effortful, cognitively costly process of accommodation to the knowledge and perspectives of the interlocutor. S needs to be satisfied that H understands υ well enough for S's communicative purpose to, in S's judgment, succeed. S must be capable of presenting different material to different audiences according

to the task to which υ is put in such a way as to hold audience interest. The initial assumption is that, normally, common ground is quite readily identified by S and recognized by H (see Allan 2013, Clark 1996, Clark, Schreuder & Butterick 1983, Colston 2008, Enfield 2008, Horton 2008, Kecskes & Mey (eds) 2008, Kecskes & Zhang 2009, 2013, Lee 2001, Schiffer 1972, Stalnaker 2002, 2014). When it is not, H typically requests clarification (where circumstances allow). S and H may come to feel they are speaking at cross-purposes and consequently seek to re-assess the common ground. At worst S fails to communicate the intended message and, because of a degree of incomprehension, H may be bored or feel insulted by S's use of language in υ. Common ground is dynamic. In conversation it is constantly developing and as themes change so does common ground. The notion of common ground necessitates a community, K, that observes social norms such as that S and H are mutually aware that, normally, their interlocutor is an intelligent and aware being. In other words each interlocutor believes of him/herself and fellow interlocutors that they are intelligent and aware beings and believes of fellow interlocutors that they too believe themselves to be intelligent and aware beings. There is a concomitant assumption of communicative competence: the knowledge and application of how and when to use utterances appropriately that combines with grammatical knowledge (of semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology) in the production of utterances in order to create a coherent text comprehensible to its intended audience. Normal use of language goes unremarked, but abnormal use may indicate a person living with autism, schizophrenia, or the like. Age, social status, educational level, and cultural background, etc. of both self and other will affect the assessment of an interlocutor's use of language and probable range of comprehension. When a member of community K – which typically includes S and H – applies knowledge of a set of facts F in order to interpret P, a state of affairs or something said, s/he can presume that others in K will also be able to apply knowledge of F in order to interpret P. The existence of F, P, and the application of knowledge of F to interpreting P is common ground for members of the community K. Once attended to, P becomes part of F, incrementing the common ground. S identifies the supposed common ground with H. H also makes assumptions about the common ground with S based on H's assessment of υ in the context of utterance and of S as a person.

In *ESSSU* Kecskes offers much briefer accounts of salience, recipient design, and common ground than I have given here, but I find the paper imbued with the characteristics I have described for these concepts. Nonetheless I perceive a few infelicities. There is nothing I have written above that conflicts with the claim in *ESSSU* that 'both cooperation and egocentrism

are present in the communication process all the time in a varying degree, and the interplay of conscious recipient design (result of cooperation) and subconscious salience (driving force behind egocentrism) is what shapes speaker's production.' I would however question to what extent recipient design is normally conscious rather than automatic. I would rather say that recipient design can be conscious when the degree of common ground with H is unusually difficult to assess. I would also grant that egocentricity (described in *ESSSU* as 'attention-bias' – a preferable term in my view) is rarely calculated, but I suspect conscious calculation is part of the egocentric approach of a seducer/seductress, among others. In other words, the true picture is more complicated than Kecskes pretends.

ESSSU states 'The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the socio-cognitive approach proposed by Kecskes 2008, 2010, 2013)'. Kecskes'socio-cognitive approach (SCA) is reminiscent of some of Helen Spencer-Oatey's work – cf. Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005, 2007, Spencer-Oatey & Xing 2003. Although Spencer-Oatey focuses on politeness, to which *ESSSU* makes no specific reference, the significance of social identity in verbal interactions is important for both authors. Spencer-Oatey speaks of 'rapport management', resulting from the interplay of face, social identity, and 'sociality rights'. Rapport management involves (a) choice of discourse content and the form of its presentation (lexical, grammatical, and prosodic choices); (b) 'score-keeping' in terms of Lewis 1979 – procedural matters such as turn-taking and attention to other participants and what they say; (c) gesture, eye-contact and other kinesic attributes of face-to-face interaction (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 19f). Social identity includes what one thinks of oneself as a person and as a group member (of family, firm, gender, nationality, etc.) – which overlaps with sociality rights and obligations. These are what one expects oneself and others to do in social interactions, and they typically form a part of common ground: when these expectations are not met, the consequence is a sense of injustice. Any behaviour on the part of another which evokes this sense of injustice has the potential to be judged dysphemistic and impolite. And in several of the texts discussed in *ESSSU* this is precisely relevant.

Kecskes (p.c. September 2016) says the Spencer-Oatey line places too much emphasis on people as social beings and too little on individuality arising from unique life experiences which occasionally dominate in the communicative process. SCA holds that both pragmatic cooperation in recipient design and egocentric pre-occupations of S co-exist in all communication. Thus, *ESSSU* claims that 'salience in SCA refers to the contingent effect of salient knowledge as a result of the attentional processing of communication in a particular situation, which facilitates or hampers the expression of intention and the subsequent

achievement of communicative effects.' This seems to me to incorporate a hypothesis propounded by Morton Ann Gernsbacher in Gernsbacher 1990 (with links back to Swinney 1979) that lexical items initially activate multiple meanings (senses) irrespective of context and then, normally, inappropriate ones are suppressed in favour of the most relevant. The basis for this is that memory cells are automatically activated by incoming stimuli and only when activated can they input to cognitive processes (cf. Gernsbacher 1990: 87ff). The 'attentional processing' referred to in the quote from *ESSSU* follows from the automatic activation of multiple meanings in the lexical items uttered. I should emphasize that SCA claims to be a model of production as well as comprehension, and thus goes beyond the structure building hypothesis of Gernsbacher and the graded salience hypothesis of Giora. But it is not clear exactly how SCA works as a production model. Presumably Kecskes is claiming something along the lines that, stimulated (? by perceptual salience) to utter υ to H, one of the multiple meanings of a lexical item is salient for S; this is the egocentric aspect of speech production. Kecskes' explanation for how this works fails to demonstrate it. His example uses this text:

> (2) This is an excerpt from the film "Coogan's Bluff."
> A man and a young woman are sitting in a restaurant after meal. The woman stands up and with a short move reaches for her purse.
> W: - I have to be going.
> M (seeing that she reaches for her purse): - What are you doing?
> W: - Dutch.
> M: - You are a girl, aren't you?
> W: - There have been rumors to that effect.
> M: - Sit back and act like one.
> W: Oh, is that the way girls act in Arizona?

ESSSU says 'There does not seem to be any particular reason for her to use "I have to be going". This is what has come to her mind first out of all possible choices.' We cannot know what else she might have considered saying, but what she did say is completely idiomatic. The comment on M's response to W seeking to pay 'hardly looks like salience effect. The man knew exactly what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it.' I don't understand the basis for this comment. W makes a move to pay to which M responds with a rhetorical question. He could just as well have said *No, no, I'll pay* or some such, but instead he questions her action which is equally legitimate though more confrontational and utterly consistent with the sexist remarks that follow. Given W's spirited responses, her determination to go Dutch is in character. Kecskes offers no explanation for why W chose to

say 'Dutch', instead he explains how M comprehends it by recourse to context. But surely W also chooses the term in the light of the context, i.e. intending to split the bill (perhaps to avoid being under any obligation to M). This is consistent with what Kecskes says about 'conscious planning and/or subconscious formulating', but it does not demonstrate the explanatory power of SCA.

I have no comment to make on example (3) from *ESSSU* other than that Ann's mentioning of the book both she and Bea had read is a means of establishing rapport and common ground.

So let me turn to example (4) where Kecskes believes M has something on his mind that leads him to be careless in the way he formulates what is said.

(4) From the movie: "Angel Eyes".
Situation: A policewoman in uniform is driving the car, and the man sitting beside her is staring at her.
PW: - What?
M: - I was trying to picture you without your clothes on.
PW: - Excuse me?
M: - Oh no, I did not mean like that. I am trying to picture you without your uniform.
PW: - Okaay?
M: - I mean, on your day off, you know, in regular clothes.

Kecskes comments: 'This excerpt appears to support the claim of cognitive psychologists according to which the initial planning of utterances ignores common ground (egocentric approach), and messages are adapted to addressees only when adjustments are required.' This claim is way too strong: instances like the one in (4) are rare and often found to require repair (as in (4)), which surely proves that egocentricity is NOT the norm. Furthermore this is not a bit of naturally occurring dialogue, it is a contrived piece written for laughs in which the guy utters an infelicitous phrase 'your clothes on' instead of 'those clothes on'. The scriptwriters want the audience to believe that M has been influenced by the desire to see the policewoman naked – a notion reinforced by PW's 'Excuse me?', a standard euphemism for *what the EXPLETIVE do you mean?* – regularly used to complain about a perceived inappropriateness. Hence M's attempts at repair, the first of which is also somewhat infelicitous – presumably also written for a laugh.

Whereas (4) does exemplify the point about egocentricity I don't think it explains anything about salience as described in *ESSSU*. I do think there is a valid point to be made about the salience of the apparently-risqué remark: it is well known that risqué remarks, like the

violation of verbal taboos, are salient in the sense that they are remembered when the co-text is not and more likely to be commented upon than their co-text (see MacWhinney, Keenan & Reinke 1982, Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006). I think what the scriptwriters achieved in (4) is the appearance of a man inadvertently selecting a sexually suggestive expression that is ipso facto salient and (apparently) upsetting to his female addressee. Kecskes claims that such expressions 'create their own context, and therefore the actual situational context cannot cancel them' but that claim makes no sense to me. There is no set of words that create their own context – unless what is meant in (4) is simply that the verbal taboo violation is salient. No do I see any evidence that the situational context in (4) fails to resolve the effect of the dysphemism. If I can make any sense of the notion of words 'creating their own context' it would be that, e.g. a term like *nigger* is ipso facto a slur whenever it occurs. This is certainly a belief held by some people, but many other people disagree, see e.g. Allan 2015, 2016a, 2016b, Asim 2007, Coates 2013, 2014, Folb 1980, Kennedy 2003, McWhorter 2002, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, Rahman 2012: context can demonstrate that *nigger* is an expression of camaraderie. Kecskes supports his contention with the example of US Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney being castigated in September 2012 for saying he was not concerned about the poor. Kecskes claims that Romney 'uttered the following sentence: "I am not concerned about the very poor"': Romney didn't, see http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser. What Romney said was 'There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president [Obama] no matter what. […] And so my job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives. What I have to do is persuade the five to ten percent in the center. …' There is no doubt Romney was widely criticised for being careless of the poor, but this was surely media sensationalism or political opportunism rather than a dispassionate review of what was said. I don't think it advances Kecskes' claim.

ESSSU includes a discussion of context. In recent work (Allan 2016 (unpublished)) I have defined context as follows:

Context *C* of a language expression ε comprises *C*1, *C*2 and *C*3.

*C*1 is the world (and time) spoken of, constituted by the topic of discourse revealed by expression ε's co-text (what has been said and what is said, including text that follows ε).

*C*2: if ε is a constituent of utterance υ, such that ε⊆υ, *C*2 is the situation in which υ is expressed; *C*2 includes what is known to H (and also by-standers and overhearers) about S and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of ε – we might call *C*2 'the world spoken in'.

*C*3: there is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H seeks to understand ε⊆υ, i.e. the meaning of ε in the context (*C*1 + *C*2) of the utterance υ in which it occurs.

In face to face conversation *C*3 is effectively identical with *C*2, but *C*3 may also be distant in time and space from *C*2 (as when we read Aristotle, Augustine, or Shakespeare today). ε may be subpropositional, propositional, or multipropositional. Each 'world' is in fact part of a world-time pair, such that the word *world* invokes a paired time. There is much else to say about context, but by and large my own views on context are consistent with that presented in *ESSSU*. One point of difference that Kecskes might find is that I say nothing here about what he refers to as 'prior context'; in Allan 2016 (unpublished), it is included within discussion of common ground and S's presupposition.

I think this is a good point to end my commentary even though more could be said. *ESSSU* is an interesting and valuable essay. It usefully advances the case for a socio-cognitive approach to the understanding of linguistic communication. But further clarifications are needed.

References

Allan, Keith. 2013. What is common ground? In *Perspectives on Linguistic Pragmatics*, ed. by Alessandro Capone, Franco Lo Piparo & Marco Carapezza. Cham: Springer. Pp. 285-310. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-01014-4_11

Allan, Keith. 2015. When is a slur not a slur? The use of *nigger* in 'Pulp Fiction'. *Language Sciences* 52: 187-199. doi: 10.1016/j.langsci.2015.03.001

Allan, Keith. 2016a. Contextual determinants on the meaning of the N word. *SpringerPlus* 5: 1-11. http://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40064-016-2813-1 doi: 10.1186/s40064-016-2813-1

Allan, Keith. 2016b. The reporting of slurs. In *Indirect Reports and Pragmatics*, ed. by Alessandro Capone, Ferenc Kiefer & Franco Lo Piparo. Cham: Springer. Pp. 211-232. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-21395-8_11

Allan, Keith. 2016 (unpublished). Getting a grip on context. http://users.monash.edu.au/~kallan/papers/c1-3.pdf.

Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Asim, Jabari. 2007. *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Clark, Herbert H. 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, Herbert H., Robert Schreuder & Samuel Butterick. 1983. Common ground and the understanding of demonstrative reference. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 22: 245-58.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2013. In defense of a loaded word. *New York Times.*

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. Politics and the African-American human Language: for the NFL to ban the word "nigger" would be racist. *The Atlantic*. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/politics-and-the-african-american-human-language/284228/.

Colston, Herbert L. 2008. A new look at common ground: memory, egocentrism, and joint meaning. In *Intention, Common Ground and the Egocentric Speaker-Hearer*, ed. by Istvan Kecskes & Jacob L. Mey. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 151-87.

Enfield, Nicholas J. 2008. Common ground as a resource for social affiliation. In *Intention, Common Ground and the Egocentric Speaker-Hearer*, ed. by Istvan Kecskes & Jacob L. Mey. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 223-54.

Folb, Edith. 1980. *Runnin' Down Some Lines: The Language and Culture of Black Teenagers*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Gernsbacher, Morton Ann. 1990. *Language Comprehension as Structure Building*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Giora, Rachel. 2003. *On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Horton, William S. 2008. A memory-based approach to common ground and audience design. In *Intention, common ground, and the egocentric speaker-hearer*, ed. by Istvan Kecskes & Jacob L. Mey. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 189-222.

Kecskes, Istvan. 2008. Dueling contexts: a dynamic model of meaning. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 385-406.

Kecskes, Istvan. 2010. The paradox of communication: a socio-cognitive approach. *Pragmatics and Society* 1: 50-73.

Kecskes, Istvan. 2013. *Intercultural Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kecskes, Istvan & Jacob L. Mey. (eds) 2008. *Intention, Common Ground and the Egocentric Speaker-Hearer*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kecskes, Istvan & Fenghui Zhang. 2009. Activating, seeking, and creating common ground: a socio-cognitive approach. *Pragmatics and Cognition* 17: 331-355.

Kecskes, Istvan & Fenghui Zhang. 2013. On the dynamic relations between common ground and presupposition. In *Perspectives on Linguistic Pragmatics*, ed. by Alessandro Capone, Franco Lo Piparo & Marco Carapezza. Cham: Springer. Pp. 375-396.

Kennedy, Randall L. 2003. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. [First published 2002]. New York: Vintage Books.

Lee, Benny P.H. 2001. Mutual knowledge, background knowledge and shared beliefs: Their roles in establishing common ground. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33: 21-44.

Lewis, David. 1979. Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339–59.

MacWhinney, Brian, Janice M. Keenan & Peter Reinke. 1982. The role of arousal in memory for conversation. *Memory and Cognition* 10: 308–17.

McWhorter, John. 2002. The uses of ugliness. A review of 'Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word' by Randall Kennedy. *New Republic*. January 14, 2002. http://www.newrepublic.com/article/uses-ugliness.

McWhorter, John. 2010. Let's make a deal on the N-Word: White folks will stop using it, and black folks will stop pretending that quoting it is saying it. *The Root*. August 16, 2010. http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2010/08/blacks_and_whites_should_make_a_deal_on_the_nword.1.html.

McWhorter, John. 2011. Who are we protecting by censoring 'Huck Finn'? *The Root*. January 11, 2011. http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2011/01/who_are_we_protecting_by_censoring_huck_finn.html.

McWhorter, John. 2013. The Richie Incognito defense: can you be an "honorary black"? *Time*. Novmber 8, 2013. http://ideas.time.com/2013/11/08/the-richie-incognito-defense-can-you-be-an-honorary-black.

McWhorter, John. 2014. Justin Bieber: not a racist, but is he really a n*****? *The Daily Beast.* June 5, 2014. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/05/justin-bieber-not-a-racist-but-is-he-really-a-n.html.

Rahman, Jacquelyn. 2012. The N word: its history and use in the African American Community. *Journal of English Linguistics* 40: 137-171.

Schiffer, Stephen R. 1972. *Meaning*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen. 2000. Rapport management: a framework for analysis. In *Culturally Speaking. Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Cultures*, ed. by Helen Spencer-Oatey. London: Continuum. Pp. 11-46.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen. 2005. (Im)politeness, face and perceptions of rapport: unpacking their bases and interrelationships. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* 1: 95-111.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen. 2007. Theories of identity and the analysis of face. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39: 639-656.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen & Jianyu Xing. 2003. Managing rapport in intercultural business interactions: a comparison of two Chinese-British welcome meetings. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 24: 33-46.

Stalnaker, Robert C. 2002. Common ground. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25: 701-21.

Stalnaker, Robert C. 2014. *Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swinney, David A. 1979. Lexical access during sentence comprehension: (re)consideration of contextual effects. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18: 645-659.