Constructions and the New Conventional Implicature

This paper investigates a sentence type that has been referred to as a double-subject construction\(^4\) and an unlinked topic construction\(^3\). The constructions of interest in this essay are observed primarily in Brazilian Portuguese vernacular (BPV), as in (1), which has been argued to be a topic-prominent language\(^5\).

(1) O apartamento, as garrafas de cerveja estavam por toda a parte.
   ‘The apartment, beer bottles were everywhere’.

The primary components of these double-subject constructions (DSC) include a left-dislocated NP and a following root utterance. In BPV, there is an obligatory intonational break between the dislocated NP and the following sentence. The DSC can be distinguished structurally from left dislocations because there is no anaphoric link to the root sentence. Similarly, the DSC is distinguished from topicalization because there is no syntactic gap in the root sentence which might be co-indexed with the dislocated element.

This essay does two things. First, it shows how the DSC can be given a seemingly satisfying account in the multidimensional semantic framework developed in Potts\(^6\). Potts provides a multidimensional logic for data he considers to be conventional implicature (CI). Importantly, his data, which are primarily parentheticals and expressive language, are quite different from Grice’s\(^2\) original conception of CI, which was based on conjunctions like therefore and but. Further, Potts suggests that the latter Gricean data do not contribute CIs at all but can in fact be explained as instances of something else: hence, my use of “the new CI” to refer to Potts’s data. While Potts’s program is elegant and far-reaching, upon close investigation inconsistencies emerge in key parts of the framework, rendering its explanatory powers somewhat less convincing. In part, this is due to the diverse range of data which Potts must bring under one account. His parentheticals and expressives clearly share certain properties, but they diverge enough that it is problematic to hold them together as a unified phenomenon.

On the other hand, a constructional account\(^1\) of this kind of data both provides for shared properties, via inheritance networks, and expects constructional diversity as part of the basic identity of the individual constructions: that is, it captures the systematic and allows for the idiosyncratic aspects of CIs. A constructional account of the DSC is straightforward, and we can point to similarities in other data such as sentence adverbs and vocatives (which are also CIs for Potts) that can be similarly described via inheritance relations. This leads to the broader implication that perhaps other kinds of CI data—both Gricean and Pottsian—can be more profitably considered as constructions. One downside of this is sentimental: i.e. we would no longer need the long-discussed category of conventional implicature. On the happy side, however, Grice’s purely pragmatic conversational implicature, which was always his first priority anyway, could be freed from the taxonomic puzzles created by its more conventional cousin.