

Pragmatic rationalizability

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In communication between rational interlocutors, the pragmatic interpretation of utterances frequently diverges from their literal, conventionalized semantics. On the other hand, rational agents will use linguistic signs according to their literal meaning as long as this is consistent with rationality.

The talk will present a framework for deriving pragmatic interpretation from literal semantics plus information about the preferences of the interlocutors and their epistemic states. The approach is couched in terms of game theory; the problem comes down to a special case of one of the central questions of game theory, namely equilibrium selection.

The proposal rests on three assumptions, which are assumed to be common knowledge between speaker and hearer:

1. Rational interlocutors will use a linguistic sign according to its literal interpretation in all contexts where this is a rationalizable strategy.
2. If a certain signal is unexpected in a given context, the hearer will interpret it as an allusion to a different context where that very sign would make sense. (This is assumed to be the basis of, inter alia, presupposition accommodation, irony, and rhetorical questions.)
3. The interlocutors will only play strategies that belong to the smallest rationalizable equilibrium that is consistent with 1 and 2.