Constraint (in pragmatic theory)

Rules, processes, and representations in pragmatic theory can come with conditions, or restrictions. Such restrictions, or constraints, pertain to the scope of application of a rule, the spread of the process, or the well-formedness of a representation. They can be seen as external restrictions delimiting e.g. an application of a theory, or as an integral part of the theory (see also Pragmatics, Metapragmatics).

In optimality-theory pragmatics (e.g. Blutner 2000; Blutner and Zeevat, eds, 2003), constraints constitute an integral part of the theory. Since linguistic meaning underdetermines the proposition expressed, a pragmatic mechanism of completion of this meaning is proposed. It is conceived of as an optimization procedure, founded on the idea of the interaction of violable and ranked constraints. The selected, optimal proposition is the one that best satisfies the constraints. This selection is performed by the pragmatic system whose role is to interpret the semantic representation of a sentence in a given setting. This system is founded on the principles of rational communication worked out by Grice and subsequently by Horn (1984) and Levinson (1987, 2000) in the form of the Q- and I/R-principles (see also Implicature, Inference, Grice, Neo-Gricean pragmatics, Pragmatics and Semantics). The I/R-principle compares different interpretations of an expression, while the Q-principle assesses the produced structure as compared with other unrealised possibilities: it blocks interpretations that would be more economically connected with alternative forms. Examples of interpretation constraints are STRENGTH (preference for informationally stronger readings), CONSISTENCY (preference for interpretations that do not conflict with the context), FAITH-INT (faithful interpretation, interpreting all that the speaker said). FAITH-INT precedes CONSISTENCY which precedes STRENGTH in the ranking (see Zeevat 2000, see also Optimality Theory).
Another example of constraints that are constitutive of the theory is Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (e.g. Asher and Lascarides 2003, see also Discourse Representation Theory). In SDRT, rhetorical relations spell out constraints on discourse interpretation. The interpretation of discourse is founded on constraints on discourse coherence. For example, a relation between two propositions can be Narration, Explanation, or Elaboration.

Theory-external constraints can be exemplified by particular lexical items that provide certain restrictions on interpretation. For example, it has been observed by Grice that there are certain words that do not contribute to the truth-conditional content of an expression. Among such words are ‘but’, ‘moreover’, and ‘therefore’. While Grice classified them as conventional implicatures, it was subsequently suggested (Blakemore 1987) that they do not have conceptual content but instead are indicators of pragmatic inferences to be performed by the addressee. ‘After all’, ‘you see’, ‘also’ and other such indicators also belong to this category:

A: ‘Oscar and Lucinda is worth reading. After all, one of the best novelists wrote it.’

‘After all’ functions here as an indicator that the second sentence is to be taken as evidence for the claim made in the first. On Blakemore’s account, such indicators contain procedural (rather than conceptual) meaning and they act as constraints on inference in communication (see also Conceptual and Procedural Meaning). This approach to constraints on inference has been developed and plays a major role in relevance theory. Blakemore (1987) calls such indicators constraints on the relevance of a proposition. Moreover, it has been since observed (Wilson and Sperber 1993) that there are also procedural items that constrain the proposition expressed, such as
pronouns, as well as markers such as ‘please’ and ‘let’s’ that constrain the process of inferring the propositional attitude of the speaker or the speech act. The scope of the category of such constraints, as well as the binary conceptual-procedural distinction, still remain a contentious matter (see e.g. Blakemore 2002; Lee 2002).

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