**The Pragmatics of Indirect Reports: Socio-philosophical Considerations**

Alessandro Capone

Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016

Reviewed by Vahid Parvaresh, *Anglia Ruskin University*

Indirect reports have been a topic of research over the past few years. As opposed to a direct report, which ‘evokes the original speech situation and conveys, or claims to convey, the exact words of the original speaker’ (Coulmas 1986: 2), an indirect report ‘adapts the reported utterance to the speech situation of the report’ (Coulmas 1986: 2). Capone, Kiefer and Lo Piparo (2015: 1) make the following statement:

The issue of indirect reports is of considerable theoretical interest, for various reasons. It is of interest to linguists and socio-linguists because its sheds light on linguistic social praxis; it is also of interest to philosophers, because clearly the issue of belief reports and the issue of reports of ‘de se’ attitudes can be embedded in the issue of indirect reports.

Indirect reports are expected to ‘provide sufficient contextual clues for the recovery of the original speech act’ (Capone 2010: 379) The practice of indirect reports, however, is a complicated issue in that it requires participants to employ a very large number of devices, both linguistic and non-linguistic.

 *The Pragmatics of Indirect Reports* casts new light on the notoriously difficult issue of indirect reports. It elevates the study of them to a new level as it sets itself the task of further exploring the intersection of pragmatics, a general field of inquiry, and the issue of indirect reports, an underexplored yet ubiquitous aspect of human communication. It is divided into 14 chapters (and a ‘General conclusion’), which together provide the reader with an insight into the nature of indirect reports, from both a theoretical and an analytical perspective, by drawing on such fields as societal pragmatics, linguistics and philosophy.

 In the first chapter, ‘Putting the threads together’, Capone elaborates on why the issue of indirect reports might have serious implications for scholars working in various fields of inquiry. As he notes, indirect reports represent ‘a way to study the interconnection between linguistic activities and social practices’ (p. 5). He notes that indirect reports are not reducible to the category of assertions but rather include utterances that are embedded in a vast array of social practices.

 Capone’s main contribution to the study of indirect reports commences in Chapter 2, ‘On the social practice of indirect reports’, in which, following Wittgenstein’s (1953) idea of language games, he expresses the view that indirect reports can be seen as language games (and in fact Chapter 4 is entitled ‘Indirect reports as language games’). This is indeed an important step in the analysis of indirect reports, as it enables Capone to distance himself from the views expressed by mainstream philosophers of language.

 The notion that indirect reports are language games is further investigated in the next chapter, ‘On the (complicated) relationship between direct and indirect reports’. In this chapter Capone clarifies why he believes direct and indirect reports are different language games by discussing a wide range of topics, including semantic opacity in direct reports and pragmatic opacity in indirect reports.

 In Chapter 4 Capone presents the idea that ‘indirect reporting is a social praxis’ (p. 73) and that consequently indirect reports obey the general conventions of language use. He scrutinizes the nature of such conventions, adopts a dialogic view of language and discusses how ‘[a]n indirect report can have effects on deliberation or on action, in that it can present a piece of information that can be integrated into the argumentative structure of practical reasonings’ (p. 81).

 Further developing the notion of pragmatic competence which, as he argues throughout the book, is part and parcel of any communication that involves indirect reports, in Chapter 5, ‘Indirect reporting and footing’, Capone elaborates on the relationship between indirect reports and footing (Goffman, 1981) as part of pragmatic competence. Capone’s discussion reveals how one can find answers to many questions if one uses an analysis based on footing.

 Chapter 6, ‘Reporting non-serious speech’, is an attempt to address a very important, yet unsettling, aspect of indirect speech which Capone describes as follows:

[Indirect reports] summarize what was said transforming it to such an extent that sometimes the original speaker no longer recognizes his own words (and may end up objecting to the paraphrase). Furthermore, in summarizing things, she may end up deleting parts of the context of the original utterance. (p. 122)

Reporting non-serious speech in a literal way, which gives ‘the impression that it was seriously intended’ (p. 122) constitutes one such situation. If, Capone asserts, ‘non-serious speech is a transformation of serious speech, surely reporting non-serious speech in a literal way is a further transformation that goes into [sic] the opposite direction’ (pp. 122-123). Capone argues that the default interpretation of indirect speech seems to be non-literal; this helps the hearer ‘understand what the speaker’s meaning of the original utterance is, as it avoids the proliferation of interpretations’ (p. 129). This is what Capone calls the *Non-serious Speech Injunction*, part of which is given below:

Do not (indirectly) report the literal meaning of an utterance if you know that the utterance had a non-literal meaning (according to the speaker’s intentions) unless you know that the hearer has clues allowing her to reconstruct the intended meaning. (p. 129)

‘Indirect reports and slurring’ is the next chapter; it is arguably one of the most thought-provoking chapters of the volume. As Capone’s analyses reveal, slurring influences both quotations and indirect reports. Taking a pragmatic approach, the chapter draws on possible analogies between indirect reports and quotations. Capone’s analyses lead the reader to conclude that even in the case of indirect reports, the hearer is constantly under an obligation to separate the voice of the original speaker from that of the reporter’s.

 As Capone argues in Chapter 8, ‘Indirectly reporting and translating slurring utterances’, because slurring is generally viewed as a derogatory speech act, an important issue is ‘how one can indirectly report or translate the speech act of slurring’ (p. 171). He scrutinizes the important relationship between indirect reporting and translating, arguing that ‘there is some overlap and that the former illuminates the latter (and vice versa)’ (p. 172). He states, ‘if a slurring expression occurs in the that-clause of an indirect report, [one should] assume that the slur is under the responsibility of the original speaker’ (p. 187).

 In Chapter 9, ‘Belief reports and pragmatic intrusion (the case of null appositives)’, Capone sets out to resolve some puzzles arising from belief reports. One such puzzle is that of how the same referent can be associated with two different notions. Capone’s proposal is that belief reports constitute cases of ‘intrusive constructions’ (a term borrowed from Levinson 2000) in that ‘the truth conditions of the whole depend on a pragmatic process of interpretation’ (p. 194). Drawing on relevance theory, Capone explains how belief reports have the potential to help shed further light on the mental panorama of the believer.

 The next chapter, ‘The semantics and pragmatics of attitudes “de se”’, deals with utterances such as ‘John believes he is clever’ and ‘John remembers walking in Oxford’. In these examples, as Capone explains, the ‘subject has a thought or a memory about himself (the subject of the thought)’ (p. 227). Capone proposes that ‘the first-personal dimension of PRO in constructions like ‘John remembers walking in Oxford’ should be further characterised by making use of a mode of presentation like “I”’ (p. 253).

 Attitudes ‘de se’ are also discussed in Chapter 11, ‘Consequences of the pragmatics of “*de se*”’,[[1]](#footnote-1) in which Capone reviews some of the most important studies on the topic, both in the philosophy of language and in pragmatics. In this review, he explains why he believes that the first-personal dimension of ‘de se’ mentioned above is ‘logically responsible for immunity to error through misidentification’ (p. 279). He argues that ‘immunity to error through misidentification depends (at least in basic cases like “John thinks he is clever”) on the awareness of the subject of the thinking experience’ (p. 277). Besides its theoretical contributions, in its entirety the chapter can, as Capone suggests, be taken as evidence to support the view that pragmatics has the potential to contribute to current philosophical topics.

 The issue of immunity to error through misidentification (IEM) is further explored by Capone in the next chapter, ‘Impure ‘de se’ thoughts and pragmatics (and how this is relevant to pragmatics and IEM)’. An impure ‘de se’ thought is a thought that assumes consistency with previous thoughts by the same speaker.

 In Chapter 13 is entitled ‘Attributions of propositional attitude and pragmatic intrusion’. Early in this chapter Capone says, ‘As far as attributions of belief and propositional attitudes in general are concerned, unlike what happens in citation proper, the problem of opacity is probably only a consequence of the pragmatic dimension of the utterance’ (p. 307).

 In Chapter 14, ‘Simple sentences, substitution and embedding explicatures (the case of implicit indirect reports)’, Capone discusses the phenomenon which he refers to as ‘NP-related substitution failure in simple sentences’ (p. 321).

 This book is excellent and thought-provoking; I can only add one suggestion. Capone generally adopts a contextualist approach to pragmatic meaning, which has positively influenced his approach to indirect reports. Arguably, a central tenet underlying contextualist endeavours is that the strategic component of meaning creation and language use should be included. Capone’s analyses occasionally seem to lose sight of this important aspect of communication, thus falling into the trap of postulating binary categories for human traits. An example of this comes up in Chapter 8, where he categorizes speakers as racist or non-racist. While we can no doubt think of having racist and non-racist categories of people, one might think that there are some people who choose to behave in either way depending on the context and on what they aim to gain.

 All in all, *The Pragmatics of Indirect Reports* is a timely and welcome contribution, and will be of great interest not only to scholars working in the field of pragmatics, but also to those interested in the philosophy of language. It is indeed a useful and substantial volume, which will also inspire future researchers to undertake further explorations on this subject.

**References**

Capone A 2010 ‘On the social practice of indirect reports’ *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 377–391.

Capone A, F Kiefer & F Lo Piparo 2016 ‘Introduction’ in A Capone, F Kiefer & F Lo Piparo (eds) *Indirect Reports and Pragmatics* Switzerland: Springer. pp. 1-5.

Coulmas F (1986) ‘Reported speech: some general issues’ in F Coulmas (ed.) *Direct and Indirect Speech* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Goffman E 1981 *Forms of Talk* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Levinson SC 2000 *Presumptive Meanings: the theory of generalized conversational implicature* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Wittgenstein L 1953 *Philosophical Investigations* Oxford: Blackwell.

1. The inconsistency in italicizing *de se* is present in the book under review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)