

Introduction to Pragmatics: Overview

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1 What is pragmatics?

Epic question. Two possible answers:

1. Pragmatics = study of meaning - semantics (“the pragmatics wastebasket”)
2. Pragmatics = study of how meaning depends on context

What is meaning? Semantics? Context?

Meaning. How can you tell whether somebody or something understands? Does Google understand language?

An argument that it does not: Google can't do *inferences*:

- (1) Obama was born in 1961 \models Obama was born in the 1960s
- (2) JFK was assassinated \models JFK is dead

The left sentences *imply* the right sentences.

The right sentences *follow from* the left sentences.

The right sentences are *consequences* of the left sentences.

The right sentences can be *inferred* from the left sentences.

A hallmark of a system or agent that understands language / grasps meaning is that it can infer the right sentences from the left sentences.

Example of a computer system designed to be able to do inferences: Cyc (Symbolic Artificial Intelligence): Reasoning + commonsense/world knowledge. Recent trend in computer science: Recognizing Textual Entailments.

Doing linguistics you can think of yourself as a software engineer, making explicit for the computer what human beings know implicitly about their language.

Kinds of inferences:

1. Entailment (domain of semantics)
2. Presupposition (semantics/pragmatics)
3. Implicature (pragmatics)

Entailment: A *logical* relation. Logic lets you capture things like *tautologies* and *contradictions*:

Tautologies (statements that are always true):

- (3) It is raining or it is not raining.
- (4) If it is raining, then it is raining.
- (5) If it is raining and it is Monday, then it is Monday.
- (6) If it is raining, then it is not the case that it is not raining.

Contradictions (pairs of statements that can't be true at the same time):

- (7) (i) It is raining; (ii) It is not raining.
- (8) (i) It is raining and it is Monday; (ii) It is not Monday.
- (9) (i) If it is raining then it is Monday; (ii) It is not Monday and it is raining.

Entailments: A entails B = Whenever A is true, B is true. Written: \models

- (10) It is raining \models It is not the case that it is not raining.
- (11) It is raining and it is Monday \models It is Monday.
- (12) Fido is a dog \models Fido is an animal.
- (13) John ran a marathon \models Someone ran a marathon.

Semantics can be defined as the study of entailments, i.e., the task of designing a system that accounts for the logical entailment relationships between sentences of natural language.

Another way of defining semantics: The study of *truth conditions*, i.e., the conditions under which sentences are true.

These are similar definitions: A entails B = Whenever A is true, B is true.

Inference relations that are *not* entailment fall in the domain of pragmatics.

Implicature: Inferences you can make based on the assumption that your interlocutor is adhering to certain norms of conversation.

- (14) There are 2 pens on the table \rightsquigarrow No more than 2 pens are on the table.
- (15) You can have chicken or beef \rightsquigarrow You can't have both.
- (16) Some of the students passed \rightsquigarrow Not all of the students passed.

The reasoning goes as follows: I assume that the speaker knows whether all of the students passed, and would have said that they all passed if in fact they had, because that is relevant. Therefore, they must not have. (An example of *pragmatic reasoning*.)

Unlike entailments, implicatures can be *cancelled*:

- (17) Some of the students passed. In fact, all of the students passed.

Presupposition: Things that have to be true in order for the sentence to even make sense.

- (18) Kepler died in misery \gg Kepler existed
- (19) The king of France is bald \gg There is a king of France
- (20) Sue stopped smoking \gg Sue used to smoke
- (21) Joe's wife is lovely \gg Joe has a wife.
- (22) He regrets having sinned \gg He sinned.
- (23) Sue knows that I speak French \gg I speak French
(vs. Sue thinks that I speak French $\not\gg$ I speak French)

Unlike entailments, presuppositions *project*; they follow if the sentence is negated or even just asked:

- (24) Sue hasn't stopped smoking \gg Sue used to smoke.
- (25) Has Sue stopped smoking? \gg Sue used to smoke.

cf.

- (26) Fido is not a dog $\not\ll$ Fido is an animal.
- (27) Is Fido a dog? $\not\ll$ Fido is an animal.

Another way of defining presupposition: Something that is in the *common ground*. *Common ground*: The set of assumptions that everybody shares, and that everybody knows that everybody shares. These are things that can be *taken for granted*.

In asking *Has Sue stopped smoking?* I take it for granted that Sue used to smoke. I assume that you assume she used to smoke.

Presuppositions are not always part of the common ground, but when a speaker presupposes something, he acts as if they are. If you don't already know or believe the fact that is presupposed, you can *accommodate* the presupposition (add it to your set of beliefs). Example:

- (28) Anne: Joe is very handsome.
Bill: Yes, and his wife is lovely too.

Bill is subtly informing Anne that Joe has a wife – not telling her directly ('Joe has a wife' is not an entailment), but pretending it is taken for granted (he makes it a presupposition). Another example:

- (29) We regret that dogs are not permitted inside.

What is pragmatics? Two answers repeated from above:

1. Pragmatics = study of meaning - semantics ("the pragmatics wastebasket")
2. Pragmatics = study of how meaning depends on context

Implicatures, presuppositions have to do with meaning because they are inference relations, and they fall under pragmatics because they are not entailments.

Implicatures and presuppositions also have to do with context:

- Presuppositions have to do with "context" in the sense of *common ground*, the set of assumptions that everybody shares.
- Implicatures depend on who you are speaking to, what their beliefs are, what your beliefs are about them, how trustworthy and knowledgeable they are. The interlocutors (the people having the conversation) are part of the *context of utterance* – who is speaking to whom, where, when, etc.

Deictic/indexical expressions: Expressions whose referent depends on the context of utterance, i.e., who is speaking to whom, where, when, etc.

- (30) I love John [depends on who is speaking]
(31) John loves you [depends on who is being spoken to]
(32) John saw a bird yesterday [depends on when the utterance is being spoken]
(33) Come over here! [depends on where the utterance is being spoken]

What happens if you don't know who/where/when? (Fillmore 1971):

- (34) a sign on an office door that says "back in two hours"

- (35) preschool children communicating across a sight barrier (Herb Clark):
 A: Put this block on top of that one
 B: You mean this one?
 A: Yes.
- (36) You: Yoohoo, Jimmy, where are you?
 Jimmy: I'm right here...
- (37) Finding a note in a bottle afloat in the ocean which reads: "Meet me here at noon tomorrow with a stick about this big"

With deictic expressions, you characterize the meaning by giving *rules of use*. E.g. if you are the speaker, then refer to yourself with *I*.

This is true also for *expressives* like "ouch" and "oops" (Kaplan): If you are in pain, then you can say *ouch* (but *ouch* is not equivalent to *I am in pain*; **John thinks that ouch*; **It is false that ouch*).

Contrast in perspective: rules of use vs. truth conditions.

You can also give rules of use (but not truth conditions) for words like *hello* and *good-bye*, which do not make statements that are true or false, but rather greet someone or close a conversation.

Speech acts. Not everything is about making statements that describe the world. You can *do* things with words.

Prime examples of doing things with words are *performatives*:

- (38) I now pronounce you man and wife.
 (39) You're fired!

Other things you can do with words: inquire about the state of the world, make requests, give commands, describe the world, express sympathy or pain.

So meaning has to be characterized at least partially based on *action*, not just truth conditions or entailments. These actions have effects on the state of the world in which the interlocutors find themselves (i.e., the context).

2 Grice 1975: Logic and Conversation

Implicature. Example:

- (40) A: How is C getting on in his job?
 B: Oh, quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

What is B suggesting? Distinct from what B is *saying*. This content is *implicated*.

Two kinds of implicature:

- *Conventional implicatures*. When the meaning of the words determines what is implicated.

(41) He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.

What is implicated: “it follows from his being an Englishman that he is brave” (p. 25). Implicatures of this type are conventionally associated with the word *therefore*. (Are these not presuppositions? Big debate on this.)

- *Conversational implicatures*: These are “essentially connected with certain general features of discourse,” namely the Cooperative Principle.

The Cooperative Principle: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (p. 26).

Maxim of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous.

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (and avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly

The relationship between the Cooperative Principle and the maxims comes in when maxims are not fulfilled. Ways to fail to fulfill a maxim (p. 30):

Quietly and unostentatiously violating a maxim. In this case the speaker is liable to mislead.

Opting out. He may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. E.g. *I cannot say more; my lips are sealed.*

Being faced with a clash: Being unable to fulfill one maxim without violating another.

Flouting a maxim: blatantly failing to fulfill it. “This situation is one that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature; and when a conversational implicature is generated in this way, I say that a maxim is being *exploited*.”

Example of flouting Quantity (p. 33):

A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: “Dear Sir, Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.” (Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only if he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating.)