

## Pragmatics

When humans communicate, much of what goes on is not simply about conveying information to others. One problem regarding the way in which semantics describes meaning is that anything that goes beyond the content of the linguistic sign itself is outside the scope of description.

**Social and affective meaning** are not covered by semantics (which focuses on **conventional/conceptual meaning** only), but virtually any real-life communicative situation contains countless signs which are used to express something about the speakers and their social relationships.

Pragmatics is concerned with how people use **language within a context**, in real-life situations. While semantics (and virtually all units we have covered before) was concerned with **words, phrases and sentences**, the unit of analysis in pragmatics (and in the units we will cover later) is the **utterance**. In pragmatics we study how factors such as time, place and the social relationship between speaker and hearer affect the ways in which language is used to perform different functions. Language is action, in the words of [J.L. Austin](#), and much of the interaction between human beings is based on verbal action, for example when we request, promise, swear, apologize etc.

The difference viewpoints of semantics and pragmatics can best be illustrated by looking at a single utterance. Imagine you are shopping downtown with a friend. As you pass a well-known pizza place, your friend longingly stares to the people outside eating pepperoni pizza and remarks "Boy, I am really hungry!". What would be your reaction?

Taken out of context, your friend has simply provided a piece of information - that he is feeling hungry. In terms of the meaning he wants to communicate, however, it is likely he intends to get something else across. You might interpret his remark as a request to make a food stop and respond by saying "Me too - let's get some pizza". Note that in this case your interpretation of what your friend means goes beyond what he has *literally* said.

## Inference and presupposition

How do we get from message to meaning? We infer the 'total meaning' of an utterance based on all information we have available in the moment we hear it. This includes past experiences, our knowledge about the person we are communicating with, about the situation, about what was previously said, what is deemed culturally appropriate and countless other factors.

To illustrate this, consider the following two examples:

(1)

You are having a chat with a friend. With a big grin on her face she says: "Okay, listen to this one. A man and a panda bear walk into a bar..."

With the contextual information available - casual conversation, her facial expression, the introduction she provided ("listen to this") - and the specific devices used, you can tell she is about to tell a joke.

Imagine the exact same words are uttered by a policeman who stops you for running a red light, by a priest at a wedding or a politician holding an official speech. Would that change the effect of the message on you as a listener?

(2)

You ask a friend how English literature class was. She rolls her eyes, shrugs emphatically and responds "Literature? Oh, you know, it was fantastic!"

It is obvious that your friend is being ironic - saying the opposite of what she actually means. But how do we figure this out? Apparently there are clues in the prosody of utterances and in the facial expressions of speakers which allow us to notice irony. These clues are not contained in the words themselves - they are in the context.

In every-day communication, speakers have a number of **presuppositions** about the world-knowledge of hearers. When I address you and say "Did you know that John and Mary split up?" I have the presupposition that you know John and Mary and were aware of the fact that they were previously a couple. Our presuppositions lead us to formulate utterances whose meaning we assume can be **inferred** by

listeners - in other words, that can be deduced by those we communicate with. After all, we all want to be understood.

## **Pragmatic implicature and entailment**

If **inference** is what listeners do to interpret the meaning of utterances, **implicature** is the process through which speakers include meaning beyond the literal message in an utterance.

Bob: *Are you coming to the party?*

Jane: *You know, I'm really busy.*

Jane's response pragmatically implicates her intention (that she won't come to the party), which Bob can infer via his past experience from countless other conversations. Pragmatic implicatures are characterized by the fact that usually several alternative interpretations are possible. For example, the dialogue above could also go like this:

Bob: *Are you coming to the party?*

Jane: *You know, I'm really busy, **but I'll come.***

With the remark *but I'll come* Jane effectively cancels the implicature that she won't come to the party.

**Entailment** is a related but distinct phenomenon and it belongs into the realm of semantics, because it is not affected by the context. If one proposition entails another, this works in the same way as a logical condition of the form IF X THEN Y. For example:

*The president was assassinated*

entails

*The president is dead*

If the first utterance is true, the second one is automatically also true - one proposition logically entails the other one.

## Illocution and perlocution

We use the terms illocution and perlocution to describe the meaning a speaker wants to convey with an utterance and the interpretation that a hearer forms when hearing it.

- **locution** = the content of the utterance itself
- **illocution** = the meaning intended by the speaker (S)
- **perlocution** = the interpretation of the message by the hearer (H)

Mismatches between illocution and perlocution are what we generally describe as misunderstandings.

## Speech Acts

When language is used by human beings in real-life situations, there are generally communicative goals associated with every utterance. Speakers express their emotions, ask questions, make requests, commit themselves to actions - they *do things* with words.

In linguistic pragmatics, we use the term **speech act** to describe such language actions. A wide range of utterances can qualify as speech acts.

## Common Speech Acts

Speech act	Function
Assertion	conveys information
Question	elicits information
Request	(politely) elicits action
Order	demands action
Promise	commits the speaker to an action
Threat	intimidates the hearer

There exist several special syntactic structures (sentence forms) which are typically used to mark some speech acts.

Sentence form	Example
Declarative	<i>He is cooking the chicken</i>

Interrogative	<i>Is he cooking the chicken?</i>
Imperative	<i>Cook the chicken!</i>

Consequently there are typical association between Sentence Form and Speech Act.

### **Sentence Form    Speech Act**

Declarative	Assertion
Interrogative	Question
Imperative	Order or Request

Note that the above association are typical, but do not always hold.

### **Performative speech acts and performative verbs**

Performative speech acts are in many ways the most prototypical speech acts, because they make it evident that we are 'doing something' verbally when we perform them. They make explicit that language can be used to perform actions - something underlined by the following examples.

*I declare the session closed*  
*I pronounce you husband and wife*  
*We hereby sentence you to 10 years in prison*  
*We herewith declare war on the French*

Many rituals (in the widest sense of the words) include performatives of some shape and many performative speech acts require the speaker to fulfill certain criteria (be a sworn judge, member of parliament, university professor...) in order to work.

**Performative verbs** are used in performative speech acts to make explicit what kind of action is performed. Verbs like *declare* and *pronounce*, which semantically describe the act of speaking, are often performative verbs.

*I order you to shut up*

A convenient way of testing the status of a speech act verb is by inserting *hereby* before the verb.

*I hereby order you to shut up*

Note that this does not work in the examples below. Apparently certain conditions need to be met in order for a speech act to function.

*#I am hereby very happy*

*#He hereby declares you husband and wife*

(I've used the pound sign here to indicate pragmatic anomaly, in the same way that a star indicates syntactic malformedness.)

The first example is strange because making an observation about a state usually does not qualify as a performative speech act. The second example is strange because a performative must be performed by the speaker himself - reporting someone else's action does not work.

### **Direct and indirect speech acts**

In everyday situations, we often do not directly express what we intend, but instead formulate our utterances in ways which appear more polite to hearers. Compare the examples below

*Pass me the salt!*

*Could you pass me the salt?*

Both examples are in effect requests, but the first one, phrased as an imperative, has a different connotation than the second, which uses the form of a question. It's obvious to us from experience that *Could you pass me the salt* is not actually a question about the ability of the addressee to pass the salt, but a prompt to action, and responding to this prompt simply by saying *Yes, I could* and not acting would not be a polite reaction.

Therefore *Could you pass me the salt?* has two pragmatic levels. On the surface level it is a question, but underlying this is a request. It therefore

qualifies as an **indirect speech act**, whereas *Pass me the salt!* is a **direct speech act**.

## **Felicity Conditions**

Speech acts (whether direct or indirect) can be classified according to their **felicity**. Speech acts are **infelicitous** (meaning they don't work as intended) when certain essential requirements are not met. When is a speech act infelicitous?

...when the utterance is illogical: *I promise to call you last year*

...when certain requirements aren't met: *I will buy you a Porsche, honey*

...when the speaker is lying: *I really like your new jacket*

Note that there is a subtle difference between the three examples. The first one can never 'work' (i.e. be felicitous), because it is inherently illogical. The second one may work or not, depending on whether the speaker can afford to buy her partner a Porsche - something she might not know for sure herself at the time of making the utterance. The third one is a flat-out lie in (in this example) - the speaker does not like the listener's new jacket. Felicity conditions are determined by context and especially performative speech acts often require a number of contextual conditions in order to be felicitous.

## **Context and co-text**

Pragmatics enables us not only to describe verbal actions (speech acts) plausibly, but it also allows us to account for language phenomena which exemplify the close connection between linguistic signs and the settings they are used in. The term context can be broken down into two categories for that purpose

- the world around us, the situation in which a piece of discourse happens (**context**)
- the surrounding discourse - in other words, what was previously said (**co-text**)

## Deixis and anaphora

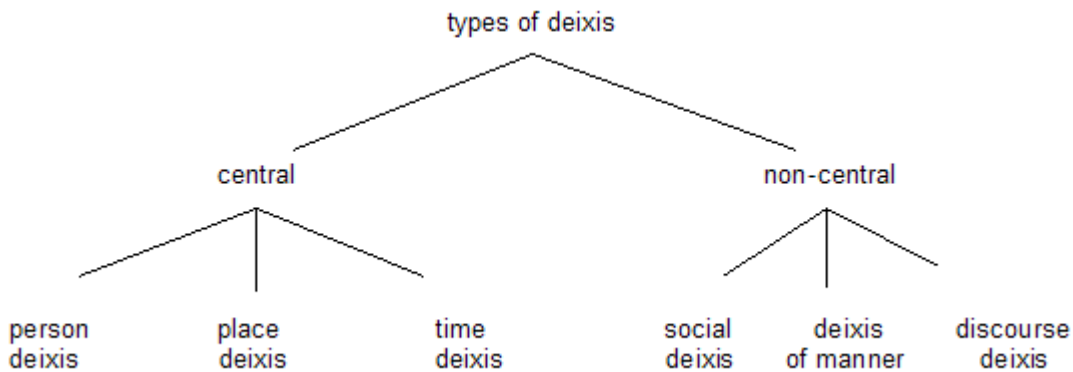
The following two examples illustrate the distinction between context and co-text using two closely related linguistic phenomena, **deixis** and **anaphora**.

*I played tennis. Then I went to the beach.*

*Mary and Lisa played tennis. Then they went to the beach.*

Each of the utterances above consists of two sentences. Think about the first utterance for a moment and ask yourself who the subject of both sentences is. You'll probably come to the conclusion that it is the same person (*'I'*) in both sentences, but it is not possible to determine who exactly *I* refers to outside of an actual speech situation. When someone uses *I* in a real-life chat, you can see and hear that person, and therefore you are able to resolve who the word refers to. But outside of a real discourse situation, this is no longer possible. Words like *I*, which carry a meaning that can only be retrieved with access to the situation they are used in, are called **deictic expressions** and the phenomenon of expressions pointing to things in the context is known as **deixis**. Now consider the second example. The pronoun *they* in the second sentence does not seem to point to the context. Instead, it effectively replaces the full noun phrase *Mary and Lisa*, saving us the time and breath that would be needed to repeat it (think about how much shorter *they* is). This phenomenon is called **anaphora** and the term that the anaphoric expression (*they*) replaces is known as the **antecedent**.

## Types of deixis



Central types of deixis include

- person e.g. *I, you*
- place e.g. *here, there, near, far, left, right, come, go*
- time e.g. *now, soon, then, today, yesterday, tomorrow, next, last*

Non-central types of deixis are

- social e.g. *Sir, Madam, Mr. President, Your Honor*
- manner and degree e.g. *this (big), so (fat), like this, etc. (accompanied by gestures)*
- discourse e.g. *this story, as mentioned above, this chapter, therefore*

## Key terms

- social and affective meaning vs. conventional/conceptual meaning
- language in context (pragmatics) vs. language independent from context (semantics)
- inference
- presupposition
- locution, illocution, perlocution
- pragmatic implicatures
- entailment
- speech acts
  - examples:
    - assertion
    - question
    - request
    - order

- promise
    - threat
  - direct vs. indirect
  - felicity conditions
- context vs co-text
- deixis
  - central
    - person
    - place
    - time
  - non-central
    - social
    - manner/degree
    - discourse
- anaphora
  - antecedents