

Pragmatics - The Contribution of Context to Meaning

We do not interpret language in a vacuum. We use our knowledge of the actors, objects and situation to determine more specific interpretations of any sentence. Pragmatics undertakes the study of the ways in which contextual features can determine sentence interpretations.

Oldea Song (South Australia)

marks shivering with cold a big snake tell you
marks put it down a white-blossomed tree
marks to throw sand with one's hands

To interpret this song you need to understand its cultural context.

A man is shivering with cold; he sees the tracks (marks) of a big snake. He tells another man; together they follow the edible snake and kill it near a white-blossomed tree. The last word of the song refers to the digging of a depression in the sand to make a fire for cooking a snake.

Interpreting traditional songs and stories requires various types of pragmatic information:

lexical - what are marks?
put it down = 'to kill something'
genre - song lyrics are often less explicit
culture - people are often cold while hunting
snakes are a potential food source
the preparations associated with building a fire

It is easy to find examples of pragmatic contributions to sentence meaning in English:

The councilors refused the marchers a parade permit because they feared violence.
The councilors refused the marchers a parade permit because they advocated violence.

Note the effect that the change in verb has on your interpretation of the pronoun *they*.

Classical approaches to semantics attempt to fix meaning in isolation from context. However, many words take their meaning from context. The philosopher Saul Kripke has argued that the context of baptism fixes the reference for people's names. The person named Shakespeare is tied by a long historical chain to the authorship of various sonnets and plays. Putnam ties the meaning of *water* to the original act of pointing out instances of the stuff.

Language contains deictic expressions which overtly point to features of the physical context:

pronouns I, you, one, it
tense past, present, future

adverbs now, today, here, there
articles the, a, that, this

Speech Acts

One of the most obvious features of language is that we use it to accomplish various functions or **speech acts**. We use language to convey information, request information, give orders, warn, threaten, promise, advise, etc. Consider what each of the following sentences can accomplish:

The moon is made of green cheese.
Where are my keys?
Please pass the salt.
One more word and you're out of here.
Look out!
You should check out the sale at Weaver's.

There are three primary acts associated with different sentence types:

Sentence Type	Speech Act	Function	Example
Declarative	assertion	convey a proposition	"The moon is made of green cheese."
Interrogative	question	request information	"Where are my keys?"
Imperative	orders and requests	cause others to carry out actions	"Please pass the salt."

The class of **performative verbs** are used to perform specific speech acts overtly, e.g.,

I assert that the moon is made of green cheese.
I ask where are my keys.
I order you to please pass the salt.
I threaten you that if you say one more word you will be forced to leave.
I warn you to look out.
I advise you to check out the sale at Weaver's.

The **hereby test** can be used to see if a verb is used to perform a speech act.

I hereby promise to look up the answer by Monday.
? John hereby promises to take me to the movies.
? I will hereby promise to look up the answer by Monday.

To perform a speech act correctly, it is necessary to satisfy the **felicity conditions** for the speech act. Obviously, the following sentence is infelicitous

I warn you to please pass the salt.

The felicity conditions for questions and requests are fairly straightforward:

Speaker questions **H**earer about **P**roposition:

S does not know the truth about P.

S wants to know the truth about P.

S believes that H may be able to supply the information about P that S wants.

S requests H to do A:

S believes A has not been done.

S believes H is able to do A.

S believes that H is willing to do A for S.

S wants A to be done.

Indirect Speech Acts

Speech acts can be performed directly by using performative verbs or indirectly by making use of contextual cues to the speaker's intention. Compare the following direct and indirect questions and requests.

Questions

Direct:

Where are my car keys?

I ask you where are my car keys.

Indirect:

I don't know where my car keys are.

I would like to know where my car keys are.

Can you tell me where my car keys are?

Requests

Direct:

Please open the window.

I request that you open the window.

Indirect:

Is it hot in here?

Can you open the window?

Would you mind opening the window?

I sure wish someone would open a window.

Rules of Conversation

We use our knowledge of everyday conversations to identify most speech acts. The philosopher H. P. Grice proposed the **Cooperative Principle** as the basis for all conversations. He argued that all participants in a conversation seek to be cooperative by contributing helpful information. Grice identified a number of **conversational rules** or **maxims** that embody the cooperative principle.

Maxims of Quality

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

Maxim of Relation/Relevance

- Be relevant.

Maxims of Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxims of Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief.
- Be orderly.

Grice also observed that it is possible to violate or **flout** conversational rules, and that speakers do this frequently to communicate ideas indirectly. Grice dubbed such indirect messages a **conversational implicature** and studied the way speakers implicate messages by flouting maxims of conversation.

Assume you find the following entry in a ship's log:

The first mate wasn't drunk last night.

At first glance, this entry seems to violate the maxim of quantity. It tells us something that we would ordinarily take for granted. Because it violates the maxim of quantity, though, we can assume the captain is implicating the first mate was drunk the previous nights.

Conversational implicatures resemble semantic entailment in that you can construct a relation between two propositions that is either an entailment or an implicature. The main difference between implicature and entailment is that you can cancel an implicature, but not an entailment.

For example, suppose our ship's log read:

The first mate wasn't drunk last night, or any of the previous nights.

The added clause cancels the implicature that he was drunk the previous nights.

Compare this result to what happens when you try to cancel an entailment:

? Ian drives a Corvette, but he doesn't drive a car.

We can state the rule for implicature more formally as:

X implicates Y if

i. X does not entail Y

ii. the hearer has reason to believe Y is true based on the use of X and the Maxims of Conversation.

It seems rather paradoxical to propose rules for conversation that everyone violates. Grice claims that his principles actually extend beyond conversation to other forms of human interaction. Sticking to conversational exchanges, can you think of any examples that clearly violate Grice's Cooperative Principle?

The text discusses the way advertisers rely on implicature to make extravagant claims. How are Grice's maxims exploited in the following claims?

Campbell's Soup has one third less salt.

The Ford LTD is 700% quieter.

Maytags are built to last longer and need fewer repairs.

Mercedes-Benz are engineered like no other car in the world.

Chevy trucks are like a rock.

Metaphor

One of the most frequent violations of Grice's conversational principles occurs when we use metaphor. Metaphors like 'You're the cream in my coffee' obviously violate the Maxim of Quality since they state propositions that are not literally true.

Lakoff and Johnson (Metaphors We Live By) observe that many metaphors observe common themes, e.g.,

Good is up

Examples:

I'm feeling up. That boosted my spirits. My spirits rose.

You're in high spirits. I'm feeling down. I'm depressed.

Much of our language about language is structured by metaphor:

IDEAS (or meanings) are objects.
linguistic expressions are containers.
communication involves sending ideas in containers.

Examples:

It's hard to get that idea across to him.
I gave you that idea.
It's difficult to put my ideas into words.
His words carry little meaning.
The sentence is without meaning.

What difficulties does metaphor create for a theory of meaning that uses truth conditions?