Linguistics for Communication

Pragmatics
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Lecturer

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A sentence can convey much more than its literal, compositional meaning.

- A: Can you cook?

  B: I know how to put a kettle on.

What does B's response mean?

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- A: Can you cook?

  B: I know how to put a kettle on.

What does B's response mean?

According to its (idiomatic) semantic meaning, it communicates B's ability to boil water.	Considered as an answer to "can you cook?", it communicates that B can't cook.

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- Why didn't the speaker opt for a straightforward 'no' as a response?

- Why did B respond indirectly by mentioning the action of putting a kettle on, instead of directly informing about their cooking ability?

- How can we understand the intended meaning even though it is not explicitly stated?

Ellipsis refers to situations where speakers omit certain information, relying on listeners to infer them.

- A: Do you want some milk in your coffee?

  B: I'm lactose intolerant.

From a semantic standpoint, the response is irrelevant. ⟶ a part of the message is implied but not explicitly stated.

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the response is irrelevant. but not explicitly stated.

The missing part of the response ⟶ *I don't want milk in my coffee because*
needs to be inferred by A *I'm lactose intolerant and I can't drink it*

If I say *that went well* when commenting on the defeat of the football team I support, you are likely to infer the actual meaning as *that went badly*.

Comprehension is possible even when words
that convey the opposite of the intended meaning are used.

- A: How are you going to pay for the ticket?

  B: I have a credit card

- A: I can lend you money for the ticket

  B: I have a credit card

- A: I don't have any money to pay for the ticket

  B: I have a credit card

In each scenario, *I have a credit card* communicates something different. ⟶ There is an additional layer beyond semantics that influences meaning.

Semantics plays a crucial role in conveying meaning,
but not all meaning is confined to a **literal** interpretation.

- How can we differentiate between literal and non-literal meanings?

- If we can't solely rely on the words themselves,
  what other factors contribute to our understanding of the speaker's intended meaning?

- How can we accurately interpret indirect, metaphorical, and ironic messages,
  and fill in the gaps left by an ellipsis?

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Context

Pragmatics studies concrete uses of language,
seeking to explain how **extralinguistic** factors contribute to
the communication of **non-literal** meanings.

It examines the specific meaning acquired in a particular **context**,
emphasizing the circumstances in which language is used
and the role of the interlocutors.

A **sentence** is an abstract linguistic entity possessing a morpho-syntactic structure and capable of expressing a complete thought [simplified definition].

When a sentence is spoken or written in a specific instance, it is considered an **utterance**.

An utterance is produced by an actual speaker in a particular **context**.

By referring to utterances, we shift our focus from the abstract structures of language to actual instances of **communication**.

- **Situation**   setting in which the communication takes place.
  Observable elements and surroundings that influence communication.

  E.g.: the context of this lecture...

- **Co-text**   what has been said prior to a given sentence.

  E.g.: *He wasn't very happy about that!*   vs   *Mark didn't pass the exam. He wasn't very happy about that!*

- **Background knowledge** ⟶ Cultural knowledge

  E.g.:   A: *Do you want milk in your coffee?*
  B: *I'm lactose intolerant*

  Interpersonal knowledge

  E.g.:   A: *I'm having a birthday party at my house on Saturday, will you be there?*
  B: *I will bring my swimsuit!*

Deictics:

Only part of their meaning is fixed,
their denotation (reference) depends entirely on the context.

⬇

They point to different entities.

E.g.:   pronouns like *I* and *you*
adverbs such as *here* and *now*
demonstratives like *this* and *that*.

The deictic center serves as reference point for interpreting deictics:
it establishes the **relevant context**
and provides the necessary **co-ordinates**.

By default, it coincides with the **point of origin** of the utterance: the speaker.
However, it can be shifted to provide a different perspective.

> *take the pen on the* **right**
> vs
> *take the pen on the* **right** [pointing towards the listener]
> vs
> *enter the corridor, the bathroom is on the* **right**.
>
> **come** *here*
> vs
> *are you still at the bar? I'm* **coming** [on the phone]

Deixis involves words that shift their reference based on the deictic center, resulting in the identification of different referents depending on the context.

Their meaning is only partially determined:
the denotation can only be established in relation to a specific context.

Typically (but non necessarily),
the deictic center coincides with the time and place of the utterance.

- **Person** deixis   point to individuals. E.g.: *I ~ you ~ he ~ she ~ etc.*

- **Social** deixis   in addition to referring to a person,
  indicates their social status in relation to the speaker.
  E.g.: Italian *tu* vs *lei* ~ French *tu* vs *vous* ~ Spanish *tú* vs *usted*.

- **Place** deixis   point to a location.
  E.g.: demonstratives like *there ~ here ~ this ~ that ~ these ~ those*.
  verbs like *come* vs *go* ~ *push* vs *pull* ~ *bring* vs *take*.

- **Time** deixis   indicate a point in time, or periods of time.
  E.g.: *then ~ now ~ today ~ tomorrow ~ yesterday*.
  I hope this year is going to be good ⟶ What's the referent of **this year**?

The city council refused the demonstrators a permit because **they** feared violence

The city council refused the demonstrator a permit because **they** advocated violence

What's the **referent** of the pronoun *they*?

Pronouns are inherently **ambiguous**:
determining their referents requires contextual awareness and real-world knowledge.

Ambiguity can cause **misunderstandings**.

Why do we use pronouns despite this serious limitation?

While aiming for absolute precision and explicitness may eliminate ambiguity,
it can also hinder the flow of conversation, making it cumbersome and **inefficient**.

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↓

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it can also hinder the flow of conversation, making it cumbersome and **inefficient**.

Convoluted speech

No pronouns = repeatedly using the same name

↓

repeated name penalty
impedes listener's comprehension

Referring can be **ambiguous**:
inferences from the context are often necessary,
linguistic information may not be enough.

- The exam will be next Friday

- Do you have any questions?

Where do these utterances exhibit ambiguity
in terms of the referents involved?

A certain degree of ambiguity is both **inevitable** and **necessary**.

It must be accepted. However…
A **balance** between brevity and precision is necessary.

How much information is sufficient? How can we ensure successful referring?

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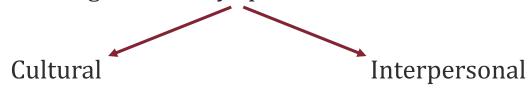A **balance** between brevity and precision is necessary.

How much information is sufficient? How can we ensure successful referring?

It depends.

Common ground:
knowledge shared by speaker and listeners.

Cultural   Interpersonal

The common ground helps **resolve ambiguities**.

With extensive shared knowledge,
fewer explicit references are needed:
it can "fill in the gaps"

Let's analyze some **examples**.

- Yesterday I had dinner with Mary

- He gave me one more chapter to study

- Last week, the prime minister was in Japan

Referring relies on **collaboration** between interlocutors.
This collaboration strives for the **least effort**,
with all participants sharing the cognitive load without being overwhelmed.

The aim is to exchange as little information as possible
while still ensuring effective communication.
The exact amount of information required depends on
the **common ground** between the speaker and the listeners.

How can we recognize the presence of non-literal meanings and understand them?

Conversational implicatures:
additional meanings conveyed beyond the semantic content of a sentence.
They are not explicitly stated by the speaker, but rather **implicated**.
They are dependent on the **context**.

E.g.:   A: *How was the food?*
        B: *It didn't make me sick* ⟶ conversational implicature: the dinner was not very good.

How do we determine whether something should be interpreted literally or not?
How does a speaker manage to convey meanings not directly implied by their words?

We hold certain **expectations** regarding how communication works.
When communication deviates from **regular patterns**,
we seek explanations to make sense of it.

We speculate about the speaker's intention to convey implied meaning beyond the literal content
and search for a relevant **conversational implicature**.

How do we think a prototypical conversation should be?

Communication is a **collaborative endeavor**.
Speakers strive to be cooperative, truthful, informative,
relevant, and appropriate in their speech.

Cooperative principle
«make your 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».

Speakers tend to align with a series of norms that Grice defines **maxims**
and categorizes under four headings: **quantity**, **quality**, **relation**, and **manner**.

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

❌
A: *What is the exam for this teaching like?*
B: *Like an exam.*

❌
A: *What is the exam for this teaching like?*
B: *It starts with all the students gathering on campus outside the exam room. Then a lecturer opens the door and invites everybody into the room...*

Quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Relation

1. Be relevant

A: *Was the food good?* ❌
B: *It didn't make me sick*

Manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression

2. Avoid ambiguity (= avoid expressions where the intended meaning cannot be deduced from the context)

3. Be brief.

4. Be orderly.

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The maxims are **not rigid rules**,
but rather guidelines we assume our interlocutor follows.

There are instances where the maxims are openly **not followed**.

When a speaker **flouts** a maxim, they violate it intentionally
in order to convey additional meanings.

When faced with seemingly uncooperative utterances,
listeners still **assume** the speaker's compliance to the cooperative principle.
Consequently, they try to discern a meaning that **aligns** with the maxims.

A: *How was the food?*
B: *It didn't make me sick* ⟶ **Irrelevant** from a semantic standpoint, fails to align with the cooperative principle. Flouts the maxim of relation. The listeners assume that the speaker wants to **communicate successfully**; consequently, they suppose that there must be an **implicature** capable of providing an appropriate answer to their question.

«I asked about the taste of the food, and the speaker responded that they weren't poisoned; however, this answer doesn't directly address my question. Despite the apparent inability to provide a suitable response, there must be an underlying intention behind the speaker's choice of words; otherwise, they would be failing to cooperate, making it impossible to successful communicate».

«At the very least, food should be safe to consume and not poisonous. The comment regarding not having been poisoned suggests that the food probably only met this minimal requirement, indicating a lack of notable qualities that resulted in a somewhat underwhelming dining experience».

Listeners recognize when an answer lacks useful information
and **assume** that there must be a way in which it aligns with the context,
as expected by their **internalized** communication model.

Consequently, they look for the **implicature**
that conveys a coherent and appropriate meaning.

Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986)
outlines the **cognitive** processes underlying the production and interpretation of utterances within the framework of the principle of relevance.

Cognitive principle of relevance
"human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance".

Communicative principle of relevance
"every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance ".

Stimulus that indicates the intention to communicate
(gestures, actions, utterances, etc.).

Relevance

Connection with the **context**

Production of cognitive **effects**

1. Inference of new information through contextual implications.

2. Contradiction of existing assumptions.
   A: *There is a Linguistics lecture every Friday*
   B: *I received an email from the professor; he says he is in Rome*

3. Reinforcement of existing assumptions.
   B: *I have just saw the professor entering the class*

Relevance is expressed in relation to a specific context, and it's defined in terms of a **positive cognitive effect** (valuable difference in an individual's representation of the world).

Production and interpretation of utterances are subjected to the condition of **optimal relevance**, which sets a threshold for the suitable level of relevance.

It is based on two **assumptions**:

1. the communication is sufficiently relevant to be worth processing;
2. the utterance is the most relevant the speaker was able or willing to produce.

Balance between the effort invested in constructing an utterance
and its effectiveness in achieving relevance.
Appropriate **cognitive effort**.

- Communication is not always optimally relevant, but we operate under that assumption.

- Optimal relevance is not determined by an abstract formula or even the content of an utterance itself: it is influenced by the context and the individuals involved (see: common ground and acceptable level of underdetermination of an utterance).

According to the principle of relevance,
listeners can follow the **path of least effort** to retrieve the intended meaning.

1. Test interpretative hypotheses starting with the **simplest one** and progressively explore more complex interpretations as needed.

2. Stop when you reach an interpretation that generates **sufficient cognitive effects**, satisfying the expected level of relevance.

   ↓

   If the speaker had intended a different meaning that required more effort to understand, they would have expressed it through a more informative utterance.
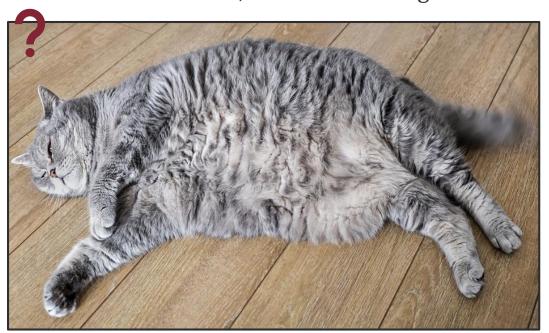
George has a **big cat**

Given that the phrase "big cat" is ambiguous, how would you interpret the utterance? And why?

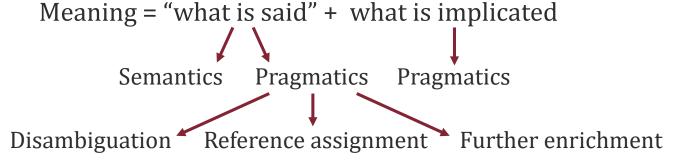He has a cat, and that cat is big

He has a pet that belongs to the genus Panthera

EXPLICATURES

Grice　　　　　　Meaning = "what is said" + what is implicated

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　↓　　　　　　　　　　↓

　　　　　　　　　　　　Semantics　　　　　Pragmatics

Sperber & **Wilson**　　Meaning = "what is said" + what is implicated

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　↓　　↓　　　　　　↓

　　　　　　　　　　Semantics　Pragmatics　Pragmatics

　　　　　　　↙　　　　　↓　　　　↘

　　Disambiguation　　Reference assignment　　Further enrichment

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[E.g.: *It will take some time to repair your watch*]

Explicature refers to the explicit meaning of an utterance, including both the **semantic** content and the contextual information primarily employed for **disambiguation** and **reference** assignment (Why? Because the semantic form of an utterance is often incomplete and requires further development).

Explicatures are **context-dependent** [E.g.: "*Refuse to admit them*" as response to *"What should I do if I make mistakes?"* or *"What should I do with people without a ticket?"*].