HG2002 Semantics and Pragmatics

Speech as Action

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Lecture 8

https://bond-lab.github.io/Semantics-and-Pragmatics/

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Overview

➤ Revision: Context

  ➤ Knowledge as Context
  ➤ Information Structure
  ➤ Conversational Implicature

➤ Austin's Speech Act Theory

➤ Categorizing Speech Acts

➤ Indirect Speech Acts

➤ Next Lecture: Chapter 9: Meaning Components

Revision:
Context and Inference

Context-dependence is everywhere

➤ For example, in a bookstore

    (1)   *I am looking for the new Wolfe* [book by Wolfe]

➤ In a snooker (pool) game

    (2)   *I have two reds left*

➤ **metonymy**: substituting the name of an attribute or feature for the name of the thing itself

    (3)   *The eel is at table three* "person who ordered ∼"
    (4)   *I spent all morning with the suits* "person who wears ∼"

➤ **synecdoche**: substituting the name of a part for the name of a thing (or vice-versa)

    (5)   *It's good to see some new faces here* "person with ∼"
    (6)   *Brazil won the world cup* "the team from ∼"

Knowledge as Context

➤ Knowledge to interpret utterances can come from multiple sources

1. The physical context of the utterance
   Deixis
2. What has already been said
   Discourse
3. Background and common knowledge
   World knowledge

➤ In a dialogue, we often only add new knowledge as a **fragment**

(7) a. *Who moved these chairs?*
    b. *Sandy (did)*

Information Structure and Anaphora

➢ Many languages signal whether information is **new** or **given**

➢ We can signal this in many ways:

  ➢ Determiners in English
  ➢ Intonation (focus)
  ➢ Topic marking

➢ There are multiple ways to refer back to something earlier in the discourse

(8)	*I tripped over a dog. The dog bit me.*	**definite**
(9)	*I tripped over a dog. The beast bit me.*	**definite**
(10)	*I tripped over a dog. It bit me.*	**pronominal**
(11)	*I tripped over a dog. The tail tangled me.*	**bridging**
(12)	*I tripped over a dog. ϕ bit me.*	**zero**

Cooperation in Conversation

➤ **Cooperative Principle**: people cooperate in conversation

"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."

➤ **Implicature**

The aspect of meaning that a speaker conveys, implies, or suggests without directly expressing.

Can you pass the salt? may implicate "pass me the salt"

Gricean Maxims

Maxim of Quantity

➢ Make your contribution as informative as is required
(for the current purposes of the exchange).

➢ Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality

➢ Do not say what you believe to be false.

➢ Do not say that for which you lack proper evidence.

Maxim of Relation

➢ Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner

➢ Be perspicuous [= be easily understood]

➢ Avoid obscurity of expression.

➢ Avoid ambiguity

➢ Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

➢ Be orderly

Conversational Implicatures and Hedges

➢ **Generalised conversational implicatures**
  the inferences we make by assuming cooperation

➢ **Particularised conversational implicatures**
  local inferences for a given situation

➢ **Scalar implicatures (Horn Scales)**
  one item on a scale implicates all weaker items (and no stronger ones)

➢ **Conventional implicatures**
  implicatures attached to lexical items

➢ **Hedges**: show we know we are flouting a maxim

Horn Scales

➤ Two words (S and W) form a Horn scale $\langle\, S, W \,\rangle$ if:

   (i) $A(S)$ must entail $A(W)$ for some arbitrary sentence frame A;
  (ii) S and W must be equally lexicalized;
 (iii) S and W must be about the same semantic relations, or from the same semantic field.

➤ Words on the scale implicate the negation of words on their left

   ➤ $\langle\,$*always, often, sometimes*$\,\rangle$.
   ➤ $\langle\,$*..., 5, 4, 3, 2, 1*$\,\rangle$.
   ➤ $\langle\,$*hot, warm, lukewarm, cold*$\,\rangle$.
   ➤ $\langle\,$*the*, {*a*,*some*}$\,\rangle$.

Austin's Speech Act Theory

Speech as Action

➤ Language is often used to do things: **speech acts**
language has both

  ➤ **interactivity**
  ➤ **context dependence**

➤ E.g. If you greet someone or ask them a question, and they don't respond it is very awkward

Sentence Types

➤ There are four syntactic types that correlate closely to pragmatic uses

declarative	$\leftrightarrow$	**assertion**
interrogative	$\leftrightarrow$	**question**
imperative	$\leftrightarrow$	**order**
optative	$\leftrightarrow$	**wish**

➤ But it turns out there is a lot of flexibility:

(13)   a.   *Would you like a beer?*   question

       b.   *Is the pope Catholic?*   assertion

Language as Truth

➤ One tradition of semantics is based on these assumptions

    ➤ the basic sentence type is declarative
    ➤ language is mainly used to describe the world
    ➤ meaning can be given in terms of truth values

➤ What about these?

    (14)   *Excuse me!*
    (15)   *Hello.*
    (16)   *How much can a Koala bear?*
    (17)   *Six pints of lager and some nachos, thanks!*
    (18)   *How 'bout them niners?*

Performative Utterances

(19)   *I promise I won't drive home*

(20)   *I bet you 5 bucks they get caught*

(21)   *I declare this lecture over*

(22)   *I warn you that legal action will ensue*

(23)   *I name this ship the Nautilus*

➤ Uttering these (in an appropriate context) is acting
  Utterances themselves can be actions

➤ In English, we can signal this explicitly with **hereby**

Felicity Conditions

➤ Performatives (vs Constantives)   (Austin)
  Given the correct **felicity conditions**

  A1 There must exist an accepted conventional procedure that
     includes saying certain words by certain persons in certain
     circumstances,
  A2 The circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation
  B1 All participants must do it both correctly
  B2 …and completely
  C1 The intention must be to do this the act
  C2 The participants must conduct themselves so subse-
     quently.

➤ If the conditions don't hold, the speech act is **infelicitous**

  ➤ Failing **A** or **B** is a **misfire**
  ➤ Failing **C** is an **abuse**

Examples of Infelicities

➢ **A1** *I hereby marry you* (said by someone not authorized to do so)

➢ **A2** *I baptize this baby Harold* (baby's name should Herman)

➢ **A2** *I pronounce John Smith dead* (uttered by a doctor who has confused John Smith with John Smit, or if John Smith is still alive)

➢ **B1** *Yes* (exchanging vows in a Christian marriage ceremony)

➢ **B1** *OK* (in response to *Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?* – wrong formula)

➢ **B2** *I bet you $50 the opposition loses the next election* (infelicitous without a response: *OK – you're on*; Austin calls the required response uptake)

➢ **C1** *Guilty as charged* (if accused known to be innocent by a jury member)

➢ **C2** *I promise to come tomorrow* (if there is no intention to keep to the promise)

Explicit and Implicit Performatives

➢ **Explicit Performatives**

    ➢ Tend to be first person
    ➢ The main verb is a performative: ***promise, warn, sentence, bet, pronounce, …***
    ➢ You can use ***hereby***

➢ **Implicit Performatives**

    (24)   *You are hereby charged with treason* [by me]
    (25)   *Students are requested to be quiet in the halls* [by NTU]
    (26)   *10 bucks says they'll be late* [I bet you]
    (27)   *Come up and see me some time!* [I invite you]

Can be made explicit by adding an active performative verb

Elements of Speech Acts

Locutionary act the act of saying something that makes sense in a language.

Illocutionary act the force of the statement as intended by the speaker (not necessarily the surface interpretation).

Perlocutionary act the consequent effect on the hearer which the speaker intends should follow from their utterance.

If I say *I have a Debussy CD; would you like to borrow it?*

➤ I have done the locutionary act of asking a question

➤ The illocutionary function is an offer

➤ It's intended perlocutionary effect might be to impress the listener, or to show a friendly attitude, or to encourage an interest in a particular type of music

Illocutionary force indicating devices(IFID)

➢ word order

➢ stress

➢ intonation contour

➢ punctuation

➢ the mood of the verb

➢ performative verbs: *I (Vp) you that …*

Indirect Speech Acts

Searle's speech act classification

Declarative changes the world (like performatives)

Representative describes the (speaker's view of the) world

Expressives express how the speaker feels

Directives get someone else to do something

Comissives commit oneself to a future action

Searle (1969) is getting at the same ideas as Austin (1962) from a slightly different perspective (and with confusingly different naming)!

Felicity Conditions for Requesting

These things must hold for an utterance to be a **request**:

➤ **Preparatory 1**: H is able to perform A

➤ **Preparatory 2**: It is not obvious that the H would perform A without being asked

➤ **Propositional:** S predicates a future act A of H

➤ **Sincerity:** S wants H to do A

➤ **Essential:** The utterance e counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A

S	Speaker	A	Future Action
H	Hearer	e	linguistic expression

Indirect Requests

- ➤ **Preparatory 1**: H is able to perform A
- ➤ **Preparatory 2**: It is not obvious that the H would perform A without being asked
- ➤ **Propositional:** S predicates a future act A of H
- ➤ **Sincerity:** S wants H to do A
- ➤ **Essential:** The utterance e counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A

A is *Tell me the time*

- ➤ **Preparatory 1**: *Can you tell me the time?*

- ➤ **Preparatory 2**: *Would you let me know the time?*

- ➤ **Propositional:** *Are you going to tell me the time?*

- ➤ **Sincerity:** *I wish you would let me know the time*

An example

(28) [Knock on the door]

(29) Leonard: *Wanna get that?*

(30) Sheldon: *Not particularly.*

(31) Leonard: *Could you get that?*

(32) Sheldon: *I suppose I could if I were asked.*

     [Knock on the door]

(33) Leonard: *Would you please get that?*

(34) Sheldon: *Well of course!*
     Why do you have to make things so complicated?

Indirect speech acts

➤ | Sentence Type | | Speech Act | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| **declarative** | ↔ | **assertion** (statement) | *I sing.* |
| **interrogative** | ↔ | **question** | *Do you sing?* |
| **imperative** | ↔ | **order** (request, command) | *sing!* |
| **exclamative** | ↔ | **exclamation** | *What a voice!* |
| **optative** | ↔ | **wish** | *If only I could sing* |

➤ Properties of Indirect Speech Acts:

  ➤ Multiplicity of meanings
  ➤ Logical priority of meaning
  ➤ Rationality
  ➤ Conventionality
  ➤ Politeness
  ➤ Purposefulness

Literal and non-literal uses

(35)   a. *Could you get that?*

          b. *Please pass the salt.*

(36)   a. *I wish you wouldn't do that.*

          b. *Please don't do that.*

(37)   a. *You left the door open.*

          b. *Please close the door.*

➤ People have access to both the literal and non-literal meanings

➤ Non literal meanings can be slower to understand

➤ Some non-literal uses are very conventionalized
Can/Could you X? → Please X

➤ Questioning the felicity conditions produces an indirect version

Why be Indirect?

➤ Mainly for politeness

    (38)   [Motorist to gas station attendant]

        a. *You don't happen to have any change for the phone do you?*

    (39)   [Doctor to Nurse]

        a. *I'll need a 19 gauge needle, IV tubing and some unobtanium*

    (40)   [Teacher to student?]

        a. *Would you be so kind as to give me a hand with this?*

$\Rightarrow$ Low Status $\rightarrow$ High Status is generally more indirect than High $\rightarrow$ Low

Politeness and Face-Threatening Acts

Positive Face desire to seem worthy and deserving of approval
self-worth: I want you to like me!

Negative Face desire to be autonomous, unimpeded by others
freedom: I want you not to bother me!

➤ It is argued that we all have these two faces
— they are universal

➤ But they are always under threat!

Brown and Levinson (1987)

Face Threatening Acts

☺ Threaten Positive Face

  ➢ Hearer

    ∗ explicit expressions of disapproval
    ∗ expressions of indifference, interruption, boasting
    ∗ identification of (relative low) status (*boy* not *doctor*)

  ➢ Speaker

    ∗ apologies, accepting compliments, losing control, confession

☻ Threaten Negative Face

  ➢ Hearer

    ∗ orders, requests, suggestions, advice
    ∗ compliments, expressions of envy or admiration
    ∗ offers or promises (adds obligation)

  ➢ Speaker

    ∗ thanks, excuses, acceptance of offers or apologies

Face Saving Strategies

➤ Bald (on-record)

➤ Positive Politeness:

  ➤ be attentive, appeal to in-group, joke
  ➤ reciprocate: *I'll help you if you help me*
  ➤ compliment: *You're looking good today, …*

➤ Negative Politeness:

  ➤ hedge to minimize threat: *I may be wrong but, …*
  ➤ allow for negative face: *Could you please, …*
  ➤ ask indirectly: *Have you got the time, …*

➤ Indirect (off-record)

  ➤ *It's hot in here* "please turn on the aircon"

Choice depends on social distance, power asymmetry, nature of the act

Holmes' Saves Face

? Which face is threatened, and how does Holmes save it?
There may be some little danger, so kindly put your army revolver in your pocket.'   REDH   **?**

Acknowledgments and References

➤ Video from *The Big Bang Theory* Season 4 Episode 7 "The Apology Insufficiency"

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