Pragmatics

Week 13

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Semantic relations

(1) The game will begin at 3:00 p.m.
   At 3:00 p.m., the game will begin.   paraphrase

(2) Paul bought a car from Sue.
   Sue sold a car to Paul.   paraphrase

(3) The park wardens killed the bear.
   The bear is dead.   **entailment**

(4) Charles is a bachelor.
   Charles is married.   **contradiction**

Semantics vs. Pragmatics

Semantics →

- what is actually said (**literal/sentence meaning**)
- how a language provides words for fundamental concepts and ideas (**lexical semantics**),
- how the parts of a sentence are integrated into the basis for understanding its meaning (**compositionality**);

Example:

(5) a. I have a white cat. *entails* b. I have an animal.

because a white cat is an animal.

Entailments come from **lexical meanings,** thus are part of the **literal meaning.**

Semantics vs. Pragmatics

Pragmatics →

- Beyond the **literal meaning**

- How our assessment of what someone means depending on particular occasions;

- Such assessment can be affected by non-semantic factors: context, conventions, common ground…

Example 1:
Speaker meaning

(6)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?

      B: I'm really tired.

B wants to **convey more than just what B said**:

B is trying to tell A that B doesn't want to go the party.

This information is beyond the literal meaning of B's utterance.

Where does the **speaker meaning** come from?

Example 2:
Anaphora resolution

(7)   a. The judge denied the prisoner's request because **<u>he</u>** was cautious.

         b. The judge denied the prisoner's request because **<u>he</u>** was dangerous.

How would you interpret 'he' in both cases above?

Example 2:
Anaphora resolution

(7)　　a. The judge$_i$ denied the prisoner$_j$'s request
because he$_i$ <u>was **cautious**</u>.

　　　b. The judge$_i$ denied the prisoner$_j$'s request
because he$_j$ <u>was **dangerous**</u>.

English speakers can quickly and unconsciously make judgments.

What are these judgments based on?

Example 3: presupposition

Speakers of any language take a lot for granted;
They **presuppose**.

(8) As I wrote this, I presupposed that <u>students</u> in this class
would understand English.

- I also presupposed that students can identify what 'this' refers to.
- I presupposed that there would be at least two students in class (plural 'students')
- I also presupposed that there would be a class.
- …

Source of presuppositions

- Some of the presuppositions above arise by default from **specific words/structure**, e.g. the use of 'this' requires something to refer back to.

  We say these presuppositions are **conventional/semantic.**

- Some presuppositions have nothing to do with any specific word meaning, e.g. I presuppose the students in this class can speak English.

  We say these presuppositions are **conversational/pragmatic.**

More presupposition triggers

(9) a. I <u>stopped</u> smoking.

    b. I <u>used to</u> smoke.

More presupposition triggers

(10) a. Nick admitted that the team had lost.

b. Nick believed that the team had lost.

More presupposition triggers

(11) a. It was Joe who stole my bike.

b. Somebody stole my bike.

Negation and entailments

Negation "reverses" the literal meaning of a sentence.

So a sentence + the negation of its entailments leads to ***contradiction***.

(12) # I have a white cat but I **don't** have a cat.

(13) # I have a white cat but I **don't** have an animal.

Negation and presuppositions

Recall: presuppositions are something **taken for granted**.

So presuppositions "survive" under negation.

(14) a. I stopped smoking.   *presupposes*
        b. I used to smoke.

(15) a. I have not stopped smoking.   *presupposes*
        b. I used to smoke.

Source of presuppositions

- Some of presuppositions above arise by default from **specific words used, e.g.** the use of 'this' requires something to refer back to.

  We say these are **conventional/semantic.**

- Some presuppositions have nothing to do with any specific word meaning, e.g. I presupposed the students in this class can speak English.

  We say these are **conversational/pragmatic.**

Conventional implicatures

Semantics presuppositions: What words or sentences presuppose.

Pragmatics studies **what people presuppose when they are speaking**.

Recall our example

(16)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?
       B: I'm really tired.

B is trying to imply: "I don't want to go the party".

English speakers can easily recognize what B implies.

Even though B never said so explicitly.

How come?

A's Expectations

(16)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?
        B: I'm really tired.

- A asked B a question about whether B wants to go to the party tonight.

- Normally, A would **expect** answers like:

    "Yes, I want to go. / No, I don't."

During everyday conversations, we seem to have **default assumptions/expectations.**

The Co-operative Principle

In everyday conversation, we assume:

Our interlocutors are **co-operative**. Like us, they want to use language to communicate as **efficiently** and **rationally** as possible.

Otherwise, we are unable to communicate at all.

Be co-operative

If a student asked me:

(17) When is the final exam?

I first assume that this student **genuinely** needs my help.

Accordingly, I will behave in a **co-operative manner** and give the true answer:

(18) The exam will be on this Friday, 10 a.m.

Upon hearing my answer, this student also assumes I'm being co-operative and **decides to believe that I'm telling the truth**.

The Co-operative Principle (Grice 1913-1988)

Based on this intuition, Grice proposed that human conversation is guided by a general principle:

Make your contribution appropriate to the conversation.

Logic and Conversation, in: P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.), Syntax and Semantics, vol. 3, 1975, pp. 41-58

Converstaional maxims

Maxim of Quantity: Informativeness

- Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

- Do be too informative than required.

Maxim of Quality: Truthfulness

- Do not say what you believe to be false.

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

Maxim of Relevance: Relevance

- Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Clarity
- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.

Recall our example

(16)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?

B: I'm really tired.

- A asked B a question whether B wants to go to the party tonight.

- Normally, A **expects** the answers like:

"Yes, I want to go. / No, I don't."

But in this case, B's answer is neither.

On the surface, it seems '**irrelevant'**.

Flouting of a conversational maxim

Maxim of Relevance: Relevance

- Be relevant.

Even when a maxim is violated, the listener is still entitled to assume that the speaker is being co-operative.

(17)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?
        B: I'm really tired.
        A: # What you said is not relevant.

How conversational implicatures work

B **intentionally** violates a conversational maxim

↓

A supposes B to be cooperative

↓

A can infer what B has implied

(18)   A: Do you want to go to the party tonight?
       B: I'm really tired.

A notices that B violates quality.

But A still assumes B is a co-operative speaker, attempting to convey some relevant information implied by B's actual utterance.

General background knowledge entails a number of things:
- Like most people, when B feels tired, B is low on social energy.
- Like most people, B can only enjoy parties when B has enough social energy.
- Like most people, B doesn't want to go to a party B can't enjoy.

Therefore, A infers that 'B is really tired' implies 'B doesn't want to go to the party'.

Irony

Context: After a boring party, Mary told Jane:

(19)   That was fun.

Mary is 'being ironic':

to intentionally flout the **Maxim of Quality**.

Mary doesn't believe that what she said is true.

Irony

Jane assumes that Mary is a co-operative speaker. But the party is in fact boring.
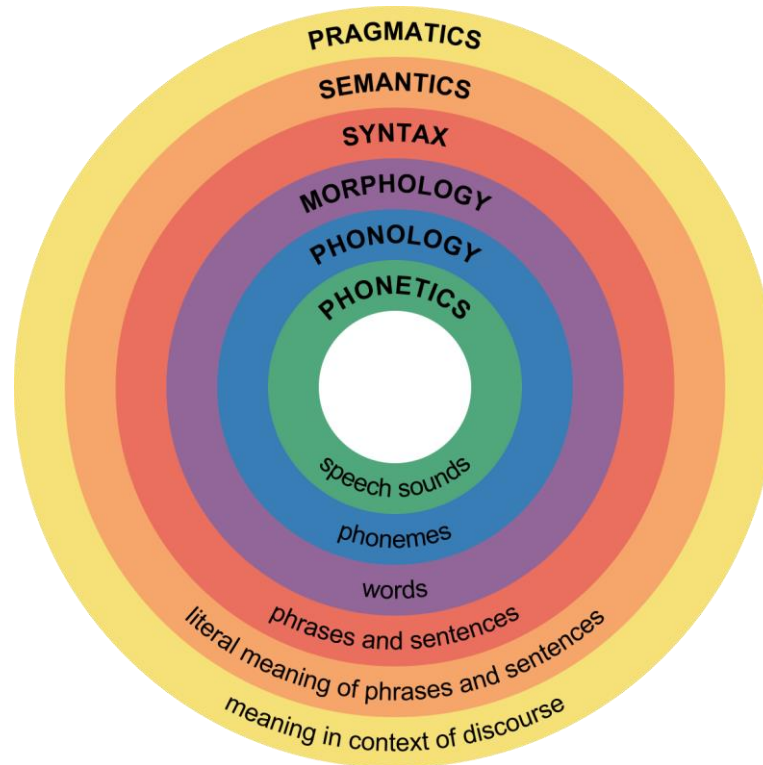
Jane notices that Mary violates **quality**.

But Jane still assumes Mary is a cooperative speaker, probably saying things she doesn't believe **intentionally**.

But why?

It appears that there is some degree of **conventionalization** associated with irony.

Roadmap

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_levels_of_linguistic_structure.svg