1 Layers of pragmatic enrichment

Pragmatics is the study of the ways we enrich the conventionalized meanings of the things we say and hear into their fuller intended meanings. In class, we'll focus on the principles that govern this enrichment process, with special emphasis on the extent to which it is systematic and universal.

1.1 Levinson’s analogy

“We interpret this sketch instantly and effortlessly as a gathering of people before a structure, probably a gateway; the people are listening to a single declaiming figure in the center. […] But all this is a miracle, for there is little detailed information in the lines or shading (such as there is). Every line is a mere suggestion […]. So here is the miracle: from a merest, sketchiest squiggle of lines, you and I converge to find adumbration of a coherent scene […]. “The problem of utterance interpretation is not dissimilar to this visual miracle. An utterance is not, as it were, a veridical model or “snapshot” of the scene it describes […]. Rather, an utterance is just as sketchy as the Rembrandt drawing.” (Levinson 2000:2–4)

The responses are a mix of things that all humans recover and things that require special cultural knowledge (to some degree). Linguistic enrichment also varies along these dimensions.¹

1.2 An approach to variation

i. One of the fundamental claims of pragmatic theory is that most, perhaps all, pragmatic enrichment is the product of basic principles of rationality. (We'll discuss what this means extensively.)

ii. This seems to suggest the absurdly incorrect conclusion that pragmatic enrichment is the same the world over.

iii. We propose to resolve this tension as follows: the basic pragmatic principles (principles of rational communication) are the same the world over. But just as our differing backgrounds lead us to extract different information from the Rembrandt sketch, so too can they lead us to different pragmatic enrichments.

¹It’s significant that computers can read barcodes but they flounder with images like this. If it weren't for the centrality of pragmatics, we'd have talking computers by now.
This lecture  We’ll first get a better grip on what pragmatic enrichment is, and then we’ll explore its importance for communication and for understanding linguistic variation.

1.3 A bit of history

In the early 1960s, Chomsky showed us how to give compact, general specifications of natural language syntax. In the late 1960s, philosopher and linguist H. Paul Grice had the inspired idea to do the same for (rational) social interactions.

Bach (1994) on the lead-up to Grice (see also Chapman 2005; Potts 2006):

There was a time when philosophy of language was concerned less with language and its use than with meanings and propositions. [...] It is no exaggeration to say that such philosophers as Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein paid only lip service to natural languages, for they were more interested in deep and still daunting problems about representation, which they hoped to solve by studying the properties of ideal (“logically perfect”) languages, where forms of sentences mirror the forms of what sentences symbolize. [...] Austin and the later Wittgenstein changed all that. [...] The Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, rebelling against his former self, came to think of language not primarily as a system of representation but as a vehicle for all sorts of social activity. “Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use,” he advised.

Grice’s ‘Logic and conversation’  Grice (1975) is a defining moment in pragmatic theory. It strikes a balance between the two extremes described above, and it outlines a general theory of how to allow semantics and pragmatics to work together to produce linguistic meaning.

It is a commonplace of philosophical logic that there are, or appear to be, divergences in meaning between, on the one hand, at least some of what I shall call the formal devices – ¬, ∧, ∨, ⊃, (x), ∃(x), ∫x (when these are given a standard two-valued interpretation) – and, on the other, what are taken to be their analogs or counterparts in natural language – such expressions as not, and, or, if, all, some (or at least one), the.

[...]

I wish, rather, to maintain that the common assumption of the contestants that the divergences do in fact exist is (broadly speaking) a common mistake, and that the mistake arises from an inadequate attention to the nature and importance of the conditions governing conversation.
2 Some pragmatic phenomena

i. **Quantifier domains** Why does *everyone* so rarely quantify over *everyone*?
   “No one goes there anymore — it’s too crowded.” (Yogi Berra)

ii. **Modality**: In my elementary school, students were often admonished for saying “Can I go to the bathroom” rather than “May I...”. I consider this an injustice; *can* has both ability and deontic (permission-oriented) readings, and the teachers knew which we meant!

iii. **Scalar inferences**: Why do *some* and *most* tend to exclude *all*? Why does *three* tend to mean *exactly three*? Why does *few* tend to exclude *no*?

iv. **Focus effects**: How does *Well, Ellen didn’t READ the book* come to suggest (implicate) that Ellen did something else with the book? (Compare, *ELLEN didn’t read the book*; see Kratzer 1991; Büring 1999.)

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**Francis Ford Coppola’s The Conversation**

The entire movie turns on whether the man being recorded said

He’d kill us if he got the chance. or HE’d kill US if he got the chance.

Harry Caul is tormented by the question of which he hears on the recording.

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v. **Indexicals**: What do *I* and *you* and *here* refer to? How do they get their referents (Kaplan 1999; Nunberg 1993; Kratzer 2009)?

vi. **Belief reports**: Is it false or misleading to say that *Lois Lane believes Superman is a reporter*? Why or why not (Berg 1988)?

vii. **Gradable adjectives**: How can *That mouse is tall* be true and *That elephant is tall* be false in a situation in which both the elephant and the mouse are 1 meter tall?
3 The Gricean maxims of conversation

Grice's maxims are the backbone of his pragmatic theory. They are not scientific generalizations in the usual sense. They are more like contractual obligations or laws of the land. If you break one, you don't falsify it. You just generate interesting consequences.

- **The cooperative principle (a super-maxim)** Make your contribution as is required, when it is required, by the conversation in which you are engaged.
- **Quality** Contribute only what you know to be true. Do not say false things. Do not say things for which you lack evidence.
- **Quantity** Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not say more than is required.
- **Relation (Relevance)** Make your contribution relevant.
- **Manner** (i) Avoid obscurity; (ii) avoid ambiguity; (iii) be brief; (iv) be orderly.

We don't satisfy all these demands all of the time. Grice identified three ways in which this can happen: we might just **opt-out** of one or more maxims, we might encounter a hopeless **clash** between two or more maxims, or we might **flout** (“blatantly fail to fulfill”) one or more maxims.

3.1 Quality: Be truthful!

Cooperative speakers obey this at all costs. If we get too lax on quality, what we say is untrustworthy, and communication breaks down. However, we are allowed to be a little lax (Joshi 1982; Davis et al. 2007).

**Flouting quality (perhaps)**

1. “Yeah, and I’m a monkey’s uncle!”
2. “Well, that’s just great!”
3. “You’ll win the Nobel prize — in your dreams!”
4. Metaphor (Kao et al. 2014a)
5. Hyperbole (Kao et al. 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The liar and the bullshitter (Frankfurt 1986)</th>
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<tr>
<td>• The liar cares about the truth. He intends to convey the opposite.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The bullshitter says things for which he has limited or no evidence, but not with the aim of deceiving. He might hope that what he is saying is true. It’s just that he is not justified in his assertions (and doesn’t inform you of this fact).</td>
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In bull sessions, the pressures of quality are somewhat relaxed.
3.2 Quantity: Be informative!

Quantity asks speakers to strike a balance between providing new information and providing too much new information (Horn 1984; Geurts 2011).

Interactions (clashes) with quality

| outstanding | excellent | } possibly ruled out by quality!

(6) Sue’s work was good.

satisfactory

⇐ as high as the speaker can go, by quantity

(7) Car Talk Puzzler segment, April 22, 2017:

Puzzler: My neighbor Frank says to me one day, he says I have five children. I say I know that. He says half of them are boys. I said I’ll get right back to you. Can you explain that?

Answer:

RAY: And it would be correct to say that ten percent of them are boys. Sixty percent of them are boys, and a hundred percent of them are boys. Therefore...

TOM: They're all boys.

RAY: They're all boys. Half of them are boys. Are they not?

TOM: I don’t like it.

Interactions (clashes) with politeness

(8) In the context of a recommendation letter:

“We are pleased to say that Landry is a former colleague of ours. All in all, we cannot say enough good things about him. He has excellent penmanship, and he always arrives to meetings on time. You will be fortunate indeed if you can get him to work for you.”

Flouting quantity with tautologies

Grice maintained that tautologies are, strictly speaking, extreme violations of quantity, since they can’t help but be true. Do you agree with the assessment?

(9) War is war.

(10) Boys will be boys.

(11) A phone is a phone.

Opting out of quantity

Some conventions:

(12) Mistakes were made.

(13) I plead the fifth.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Literal interpretations</th>
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<td>Kyle: “Can you pass the salt?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marge “Yes.” (without passing the salt)</td>
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</table>

Let’s find (i) a context in which Marge’s reply is pragmatically odd (uncooperative) and (ii) a context in which it is natural.
3.3 Relevance: Be relevant!

Relevant to what? It’s useful to assume that speakers are working to address some question or questions. These might be highly abstract questions that they can’t really articulate, but they are nonetheless present, and we’re expected to offer information that helps answer them (Ginzburg 1996; Roberts 1996; Beaver & Clark 2008).

A fundamental pressure The pressure of relevance is so strong and so important that, if you try to break free of it, people will still assume you are abiding by it and so will struggle to make what you say relevant somehow to the topic at hand.

Overlap with quantity Grice’s quantity mentions what’s “required”. In practice, this means that it overlaps a lot with relevance. One approach is to simplify quantity so that it simply says “Be informative”, with excesses handled by relevance.

Flouting relevance

(14) “Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn’t been to prison yet.” (from ‘Logic and conversation’)

Opting out (or attempting to opt out) of relevance

(15) A: How do I put this table together?
B: Very carefully.

Examples from the group work?

3.4 Manner: Be clear and concise!

Manner regulates the forms we use (McCawley 1978; Horn 1984; Blutner 2000). The other maxims concern the content of those forms.

Inherent conflict The submaxims of manner are inherently in conflict. For instance, short utterances tend to be ambiguous, and avoiding ambiguities often requires long sentences.

A related heuristic (Levinson) Normal events are reported with normal language. Unusual events are reported with unusual language.

Flouting or opting out of “Avoid obscurity”

(16) To show that she is pleased, Sue contracts her zygomatic major muscle and her orbicularis oculi muscle.
Flouting “Be brief”

(17) A newspaper review of a newly opened play says that, in the third act, “Soap opera star Rachel Singer produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of an aria from Rigoletto.”

Being orderly with and

(18) a. I got into bed and brushed my teeth.
   b. I brushed my teeth and got into bed.
   c. I got into bed and brushed my teeth — but not in that order!
   d. I took pragmatics and I took syntax.
   e. Germany is in Europe and Canada is in North America.

3.5 Politeness: The missing maxim

The pressure to be polite can be powerful — in some situations (and in some cultures), it can overwhelm all the other pragmatic pressures, resulting in utterances that are overly long (violating manner) and under-informative (violating quantity).

(19) Have you ever said
   a. “I think this is the right way” when you knew it was? You might have been trying to help your addressee save face by minimizing the difference in your knowledge/expertise.
   b. “Sorry to bother you, but might you have the time to…” when you really just wanted to issue a request? If so, you might have been trying (or acting as if you were trying) to provide or addressee with a graceful way decline your request.

This behavior arises from more fundamental social pressures concerning our desire to save face (avoid awkward embarrassment or worse). For discussion, see Lakoff 1973; Brown & Levinson 1987, 1978; Watts 2003.

References


