

Assignment 5

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2022

Distributed Feb 15; due Feb 22

1 The pragmatics of modification

[4 points]

Consider the following pragmatic observations:

- A speaker who uses the phrase *my biological father* is likely to invite the inference that they have multiple father figures in their life, or at least signal awareness that there are different notions of fatherhood.
- In Sedivy 2007,¹ experimental participants wearing eyetrackers were shown a visual scene containing only a tall cup, a short cup, and a tall pitcher. Participants who heard the phrase *Give me the tall ...* looked to the tall cup even before the utterance was complete. What assumption about modifiers seems to be behind this anticipatory looking?
- In a police procedural, a suspect is taken to have slipped up when she refers to her “first call” to the victim when she previously stated that she had called the victim only once. Why? If she made only one call to the victim, then surely that call is her first call to the victim. And yet the suspect was regarded as deceptive or dishonest somehow based on this modified noun.

First, state the generalization concerning attributive modifiers that unites all of these examples, and **connect this generalization with each of the examples** (5–7 sentences). Second, describe the role of the maxim of manner in explaining this generalization (2–3 sentences).

2 The pragmatics of universal quantification

[2 points]

On the theory of determiners we’ve developed so far, sentences involving the universal quantifier *every* (e.g., *every student danced*) do not entail the corresponding *some* statements (e.g., *some student danced*).

Task 1 Show that this entailment fails to hold. As always, to do this, you simply need to find a pair of sets A and B such that $\llbracket \text{every} \rrbracket(A)(B) = \text{T}$ but $\llbracket \text{some} \rrbracket(A)(B) = \text{F}$, and explain why the entailment fails to hold.

Task 2 Use the Gricean maxim of quantity to explain why saying a sentence like *every A B* would be disfavored where *some A B* was known to be false. Hint: focus on the failure of entailment you identified and consider the contribution of the B argument in that case to the *every* claim.

¹Sedivy, Julie. 2007. Implicatures in real-time conversation: A view from language processing research. *Philosophy Compass* 2/3: 475–496.

3 Crash blossoms

[4 points]

Note: this is not required for people doing a final project. Final projectors should answer the next question instead.

A *crash blossom* is a comically ambiguous headline. Language Log now has a huge collection of them.² Some examples:

- Dr. Ruth Discusses Sex with Reporters
- McDonald's Fries Holy Grail for Potato Farmers
- Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
- Missing Woman Remains Found
- Gator Attacks Puzzle Experts
- Violinist linked to JAL Crash Blossoms

John McIntyre identified the origins of the term, I believe.³ The headline that inspired it is the last one given above, which makes you wonder how a violinist could cause a crash blossom (whatever *that* is). First, articulate the nature of the *clash* (in the sense of that word from 'Logic and conversation') that these examples manifest, with references to specific (sub)maxims, using a subset of the examples from above (3–5 sentences). Second, comment on why it is surprising, from a Gricean perspective, that we perceive these ambiguities at all (3–5 sentences).

Final project task

[4 points]

Note: this problem is required only for people doing a final project. Everyone else should answer question 3 instead.

The goal of this question is to begin laying the foundation for your final project. We're looking for two long paragraphs (say, a half a page each), and our hope is that this becomes the basis for a productive dialogue with your teaching team mentor about scope, goals, expectations, etc.

First paragraph The contents will depend somewhat on the kind of project that you're doing:

- If you're writing a standard essay:** Write a paragraph that describes the essay's empirical focus as you currently understand it, paying special attention to places where the topic connects with material from the course (the more specific the better).
- If you're creating a pilot experimental design, original corpus, or computational implementation:** Write a paragraph that describes how your project relates to material from our course (the more specific the better) and then provide the motivation for your project. For example, if you're going to implement an extension of RSA, then you can discuss how this

²<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/n11/?cat=118>

³<http://johnemcintyre.blogspot.com/2009/08/now-we-have-term-for-it.html>

extension relates to Grice and to the basic version of RSA that we're covering, and this should move you naturally to the empirical motivation for the extension. Or, if you're creating a corpus of examples of a specific kind, then you should explain which phenomena from class the examples relate to and then articulate what research questions your corpus will enable us to answer.

If your project idea doesn't fit into the above categories, please do a private post on the Ed forum with a description of what you want to do, so that we can give you feedback on its viability and help you figure out what to do for this assignment.

Second paragraph Give full citation information (at least full author name(s), year, title; a lonely hyperlink does not suffice) for the paper that is most central to your project, and write a brief summary of it, making sure that you explain how it relates to the content of your paragraph 1. We don't expect you to have mastered the paper at this stage, but you should be able to summarize it at a high-level and explain how it is relevant to your topic. (You're free to cite as many papers as you like in this paragraph, but please focus on one of them for now.)