Overview of topics

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2025

Jan 7

1 Kinds of meaning

For any given utterance, we can ask

- What does it claim, ask, demand, . . . ?
- What does it presuppose?
- What does it suggest or imply?
- What are its connotations?

2 Entailment

(1) a. Sandy danced.
b. Sandy waltzed.

(2) a. Sandy didn't dance.
b. Sandy didn't waltz.

(3) a. A student danced.
b. A Swedish student danced.
c. A student waltzed.

(4) a. No student danced.
b. No Swedish student danced.
c. No student waltzed.

(5) a. Every student danced.
b. Every Swedish student danced.
c. Every student waltzed.

(6) a. Exactly three students danced.
b. Exactly three Swedish students danced.
c. Exactly three students waltzed.

(7) a. Few students danced.
b. Few Swedish students danced.
c. Few students waltzed.

Try with *most*, *not every*, *only*, *a minority of*.

3 Modifiers

(8) a(n) { near-sighted, alleged, former, fake, porcelain } spy (which of these, if any, entail *spy*?)

(9)

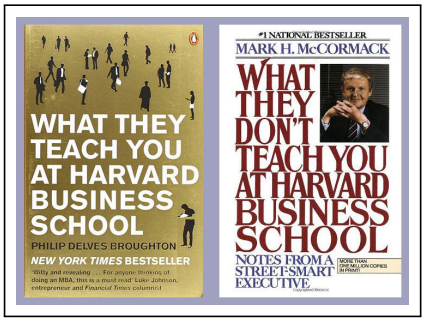
(10) a. banana cake
b. skillet cake
c. birthday cake
d. pumpkin cake

4 Pragmatics

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.

"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 [...]." (Levinson's (2000) *Presumptive Meanings*)

(11)



"These two books contain the sum total of all human knowledge" (@James_Kpatrick)

(12)

h/t Julia Gong

From a 1993 Supreme Court decision (cited in Solan & Tiersma's (2004) *Speaking of Crime*):

> [L]anguage, of course, cannot be interpreted apart from context. The meaning of a word that appears ambiguous if viewed in isolation may become clear when the word is analyzed in light of the terms that surround it.

(13) a. From Solan and Tiersma's *Speaking of Crime*, p. 213:

The defendant, Samuel Bronston, was president of Samuel Bronston Productions, Inc., a movie production company. He had personal as well as company bank accounts in various European countries. His company petitioned for bankruptcy. At the bankruptcy hearing, the following exchange occurred between the lawyer for the creditor and Bronston [who was under oath —CP]:

Q Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr. Bronston?
A No, sir.
Q Have you ever?
A The company had a bank account there for about six months, in Zurich.

The facts: Bronston earlier had a large personal bank account in Switzerland for five years, where he had deposited and drawn checks totalling more than $180,000.

b. Solan and Tiersma summarize the legal definition of perjury (p. 212–213):

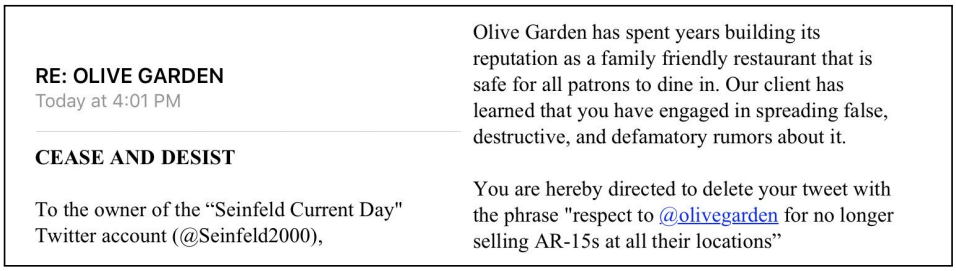
Perjury consists of lying under oath: having sworn to tell the truth, the witness speaks falsely. [...] Federal law also requires that the person "willfully and contrary to such oath states or subscribes any material matter which he does not believe to be true." This is often called the "false statement" requirement. Perjury involves asserting or declaring that a particular state of affairs exists (or existed in the past), when the speaker knows that not to be the case. If the speaker did not know that the actual and asserted state of affairs were different, she would have made a mere mistake. Not only must the accused make a false statement, but it must be material. If the false statement relates to a minor matter or something that is unlikely to influence a trial or other official proceeding, it does not constitute perjury, even though we might still call the statement a lie.

5 Presuppositions

(14) Who wants to go swimming? We do, too. (NY Times editorial page, 2007-03-31)

(15) Confirm your eBay transaction [spam email]

(16)



("It is false that Olive Garden no longer sells AR-15s")

6 Speech-acts

Sentence type	Examples	Force
Declarative	Turtles are amazing.	assertion
	I wonder where Kim is.	question
	You should move your bicycle.	suggestion
	You can have a cookie.	invitation
Interrogative	What day is today?	question
	What on earth are you doing?	accusation
	Do you want to have ice-cream?	invitation
	Could you help me?	request
Imperative	Move your bicycle!	command
	Have a cookie.	invitation
	Please rain!	plea
	Get well soon!	well-wish

(17) [Context: A police officer has stopped a driver for speeding.]
Driver: Is there any way that we can sort this out here, officer?

(18) *Which actually invokes the speaker's right to counsel, in the technical legal sense?*

a. I hereby request to speak with a lawyer.
b. Can I speak with a lawyer?
c. Maybe I should talk with a lawyer.
d. Will I see a lawyer at some point?

7 Framing

(19)

(20) Democratic party vs. Democrat party

(21) hunger relief

(22) tax relief

(23) Obamacare

(24) green space

8 Swearing

What are swears, and how do they work, semantically, pragmatically, socially, legally, . . . ? Why do they have so much power? What is the nature of the taboos that surround them?