Introduction to pragmatics

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2024

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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

"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*)

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 *are* the same the world over. But just as our differing backgrounds lead us to extract different information from the sketch above, so too can they lead us to different pragmatic enrichments.
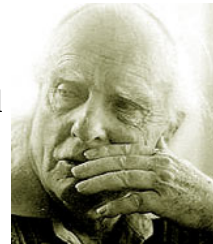
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[1]It's significant that computers can read barcodes but they flounder with images like this. If it weren't for the centrality of pragmatics, we'd have talking computers by now.

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 pragmatics.

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. [...] [T]he 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 – $\sim$, $\wedge$, $\vee$, $\supset$, (x), $\exists(x)$, $\int x$ (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 we *won't* get to discuss

Quantifier domains   Why does *everyone* so rarely quantify over everyone?

The 'everything bagel'

@patrickmarkryan: Come on, Everything Bagels, who you tryin' to fool? You got like 6 seasonings on there. That's a lot, but it ain't everything.

@dwineman: Last time I had an everything bagel I got poppy seeds, Mira Sorvino, and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit all over my shirt.

"In the know" deletion

"No one goes there anymore – it's too crowded." (Yogi Berra)

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!

Focus   Intonational focus can signal a wide range of meanings.

Insulting focus

- *Kathryn called Chris a linguist, and then she INSULTED him.*

- *Kathryn called Chris a linguist, and then HE insulted HER.*

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*

The entire movie turns on whether the man being recorded said

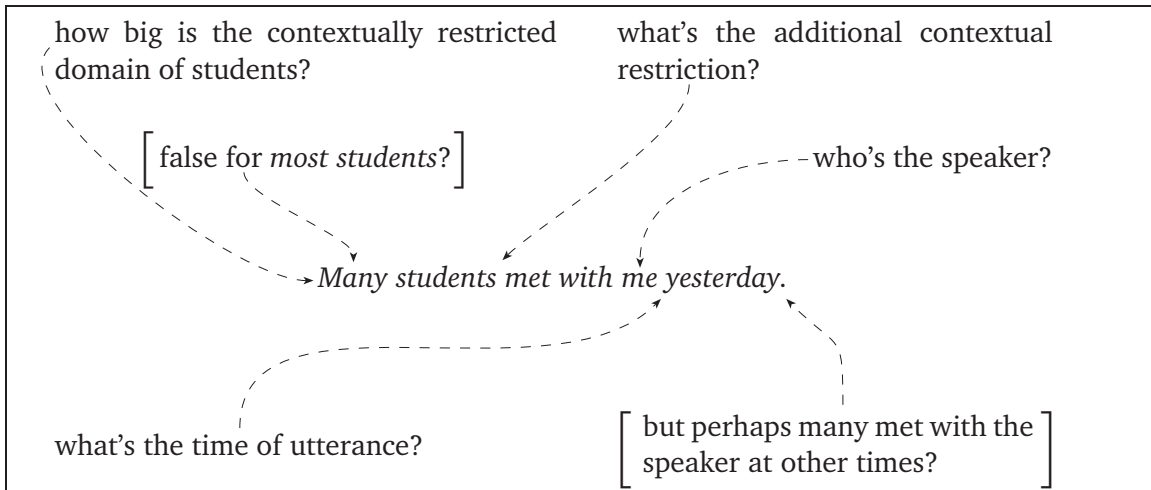He'd kill us if he got the chance.   or   HE'd kill US if he got the chance.

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

Indexicals   What do *I* and *you* and *here* refer to? How do they get their referents?

Belief reports   Is it false, or just misleading, to say that *Lois Lane believes Superman is a reporter*?

Non-literal language use   Metaphor (*The lawyer is a shark*), hyperbole (*The assignment took like 10,000 hours!*), irony (*This tortoise is not exactly speedy*), sarcasm (*Great idea!*).

how big is the contextually restricted domain of students?

what's the additional contextual restriction?

$\left[\text{false for } \textit{most students}?\right]$

who's the speaker?

Many students met with me yesterday.

what's the time of utterance?

$\left[\begin{array}{l}\text{but perhaps many met with the} \\ \text{speaker at other times?}\end{array}\right]$

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, sometimes by choice and sometimes out of necessity. Grice identified three ways in which this can happen:

  i. We might encounter a *clash* between two or more maxims.

 ii. We might *opt-out* of one or more maxims.

iii. We might *flout* ("blatantly fail to fulfill") one or more maxims.

3.1 Quality: Be truthful!

- **A fundamental pressure.** 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).

- **The importance of evidence.** The evidential aspect of the maxim is crucial. If you accidentally say something true but you don't have access to supporting evidence, you don't really satisfy the quality maxim.

Clashes Where quality clashes with other maxims, it generally wins out, since it is so fundamental.

Opting out of quality It is generally not easy to publicly opt-out of quality. We *might* consider acting and other forms of performance as opting-out, but this doesn't really explain much. However, brainstorming sessions might be ones in which the participants collectively agree to partially opt-out for the sake of generating new ideas.

Flouting quality (perhaps)

(1)   "Yeah, and I'm a monkey's uncle!"

(2)   "Well, that's just great!"   (Sarcasm)

(3)   "You'll win the Nobel prize – in your dreams!"   (Siegel 2015)

(4)   "The lawyer is a shark."   (Kao et al. 2014a)

(5)   "The assignment took like 10,000 hours."   (Kao et al. 2014b)

3.2 Quantity: Be informative!

- Quantity asks speakers to strike a balance between providing new information ("Make your contribution as informative as is required.") and providing too much new information ("Do not say more than is required").

- The second clause seems to overlap with the maxim of relevance.

- Quantity regulates the amount of information conveyed. Long utterances are not necessarily contentful, and short utterances can be highly contentful. The maxim that regulates length is manner.

A clash between quantity and quality

(6)   a.   **Sue's work was**
| | outstanding \} possibly ruled out by quality! |
| | excellent |

good. $\Longleftarrow$ as high as the speaker can go, by quantity
satisfactory

   b.   On a form: Was the student's work satisfactory?   Yes _____   No _____

A clash between quantity and quality or politeness (hard to tell)

(7)   **Source**: Car Talk (March 31, 2002)

      Example: One of the hosts read the following joke, purportedly taken from an evaluation sheet filled in by students at the end of a college course:

> Q: "How would you describe the quality of the textbook?"
> A: "Very high. It is printed on the very best paper and beautifully bound."

A clash between quantity and 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."

Opting out of quantity   Some conventions:

(9)   No comment.   (10)   Mistakes were made.   (11)   I plead the fifth.

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?

(12)   War is war.   (13)   Boys will be boys.   (14)   A phone is a phone.

Flouting quantity to achieve a politeness effect

(15)   a.   Can you pass the salt?

      b.   Could you open the window (please)?

      c.   Do you know what time it is?

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.** As I mentioned above, 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.

Clash between relevance and quality

(16) **Source**: The detective show *Monk*, 'Mr. Monk goes to the Carnival'

      Context: The subject is whether Mr. Monk, who earlier had a nervous breakdown, is ready to be put back on the police force. Stottlemeyer is Monk's friend and former captain.

Commission member	Is Mr. Monk ready to be put back on the force?
Stottlemeyer	Mr. Monk has *excellent* instincts.
Commission member	Yes, but is he ready to be reinstated?
Stottlemeyer	He is an *excellent* investigator.
Commission member	Captain, please…

Clash between relevance and quality

(17) A   Yeah, let's not bother. It's not like we're broke or something.
       B   Yeah, we're rich, aren't we?
       A   We're rich in heart.

Opting out (or attempting to opt out) of relevance

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

Flouting relevance

(19) "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')

3.4   Manner: Be clear and concise!

- Manner regulates the forms we use. 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.

Being orderly with *and*: A clash between "Be brief" and "Avoid ambiguity"

(20) 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.

Flouting or opting out of "Avoid obscurity"

(21)   To show that she is pleased, Sue contracts her zygomatic major muscle and her orbicularis oculi muscle.

Flouting "Be brief"

(22)   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."

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).

(23)   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.

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