LIN241, Winter 2021
Week 1 summary

One of the goals of this first lecture was to motivate the study of semantics, by illustrating some of the questions that this field can help to answer (see e.g. slides 9 and 11).

Another goal of the lecture was to introduce some of the concepts that we will study in the first half of this course (slides 13 to 42). These concepts will help us to understand the different dimensions of sentence meaning (the first of the four steps on slide 12).
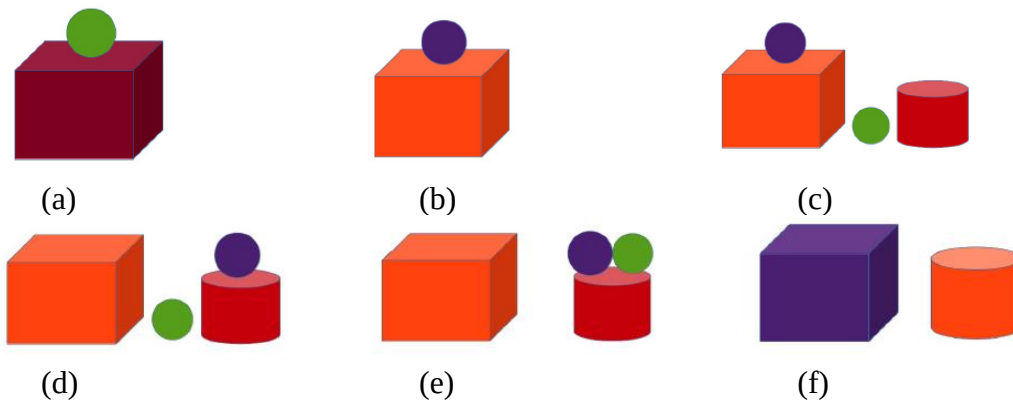
1.   Truth-conditions

(1)   **Definition of "truth-conditions":**

   The truth-conditions of a sentence are the conditions that must be satisfied for the sentence to be true.

(2)   **Knowing the meaning of a sentence is knowing its truth-conditions:**

   For instance, someone who knows the meaning of (3) should know that this sentence is true in situations (a), (b) and (c) but not in situations (d), (e) and (f).

(3)   There is a ball on top of a cube.

(a)	(b)	(c)
(d)	(e)	(f)

2.   Entailments and contradictions

(4)   **Definition of "entailment":**

   A sentence φ entails a sentence ψ if and only if every situation in which φ is true is a situation in which ψ is true.

   (Note: "A if and only if B" means "whenever A is true, B is true, and whenever B is true, A is true." This is a common way to define A as B.)

(5)   Observations:

When evaluating whether φ entails ψ, we must take into account every possible situation in which φ is true, even if φ is false in the real world.

For instance: "Jess and Chris saw a unicorn" entails that "Jess saw a unicorn", although neither sentence is true in the real world.

(6)   **Definition of "contradiction":**

A sentence φ and a sentence ψ are contradictory if and only if there is no possible situation in which φ and ψ are both true.

A sentence φ is a contradiction if and only if there is no possible situation in which it is true.

(7)   **Entailment and contradiction:**

φ entails ψ if and only if the sentence "φ and not ψ" (or "φ but not ψ") is a contradiction.

(8)   Examples:

"Susanne ate apples" entails "Susanne ate something."

"Susanne ate apples, but she did not eat anything" is a contradiction

"Fran managed to leave early" entails "Fran left early."

"Fran managed to leave early but she didn't leave early" is a contradiction.

(9)   Practical advice:

To assess whether φ entails ψ, you should first ask yourself:

1. Can I imagine a situation in which both φ and ψ are true?
2. Can I imagine a situation in which φ is true and ψ is false?

If you answer YES to 1 and NO to 2, then φ entails ψ.

If you answer YES to 1 and YES to 2, then φ does not entail ψ.

If you answer NO to 1, then φ and ψ are contradictory.

3.   Implicatures (will be studied in week 3)

(10)   Informal definition of "implicature":

An implicature of an utterance of a sentence φ is an inference that is not part of the literal meaning of φ, but that is reached by reasoning about what the speaker wanted to communicate when she uttered φ, given the literal meaning of φ and the assumption that she was trying to make a helpful contribution to the conversation.

(11)   Example:

    A: Is Chris smart?
    B: He is very beautiful.

    B's utterance implicates that Chris is not smart.

(12)   Warning:

    "Implicature" is a technical term. It does not mean the same as "implication."

4.   Speech acts (will be studied in week 4)

(13)   **Informal definition of "speech act"**:

    A speech act is an action that is performed through the utterance of a sentence.

(14)   Examples:

    By uttering the sentence "Can you pass me the salt, please?" the speaker can perform a request.

    By uttering the sentence "Get out of here!" the speaker can give an order.

5.   Presuppositions (will be studied in week 5)

(15)   Informal definition of "presupposition":

    A presupposition is a proposition that is presented as taken for granted when a speaker utters a sentence.

(16)   Example:

    A speaker who utters "Jess stopped smoking" presupposes that Jess used to smoke.

(17)   A characteristic property of presuppositions is that they 'survive' the negation of a sentence.

(18)   Example:

    A speaker who utters "Jess did not stop smoking" also presupposes that Jess used to smoke.