

Semiotics & Discourse II: The Secret Rules of Conversation

LIN 313 Language and Computers
Fall 2025

Instructor: Gabriella Chronis

Admin 9/19

- Homework 1: back monday
- HW 2 due 9/29
 - fixed numbering & broken link
 - improved text generation in the n-gram model builder
 - do what you can first. problems are out of order from the order we cover things in class
 - Do 1 + 5 first; others next week
- Review: Perplexity and Language Variation

Objectives

Problem 5 on the HW asks you to analyze a piece of discourse into relevant features. For that, we need to know the relevant **dimensions of variation** (a.k.a. **features**)

Today, we will look at a few more aspects of the organization of linguistic interactions, and how they can be varied:

- Jakobson's 6 functions: why people talk
- Speech acts: what utterances do
- Gricean maxims: rules of conversation

Kinds of Variation

Style / (idiolect)

Register

Genre

Dialect

Language

Kinds of Variation

Style / (idiolect): individual “language habits”

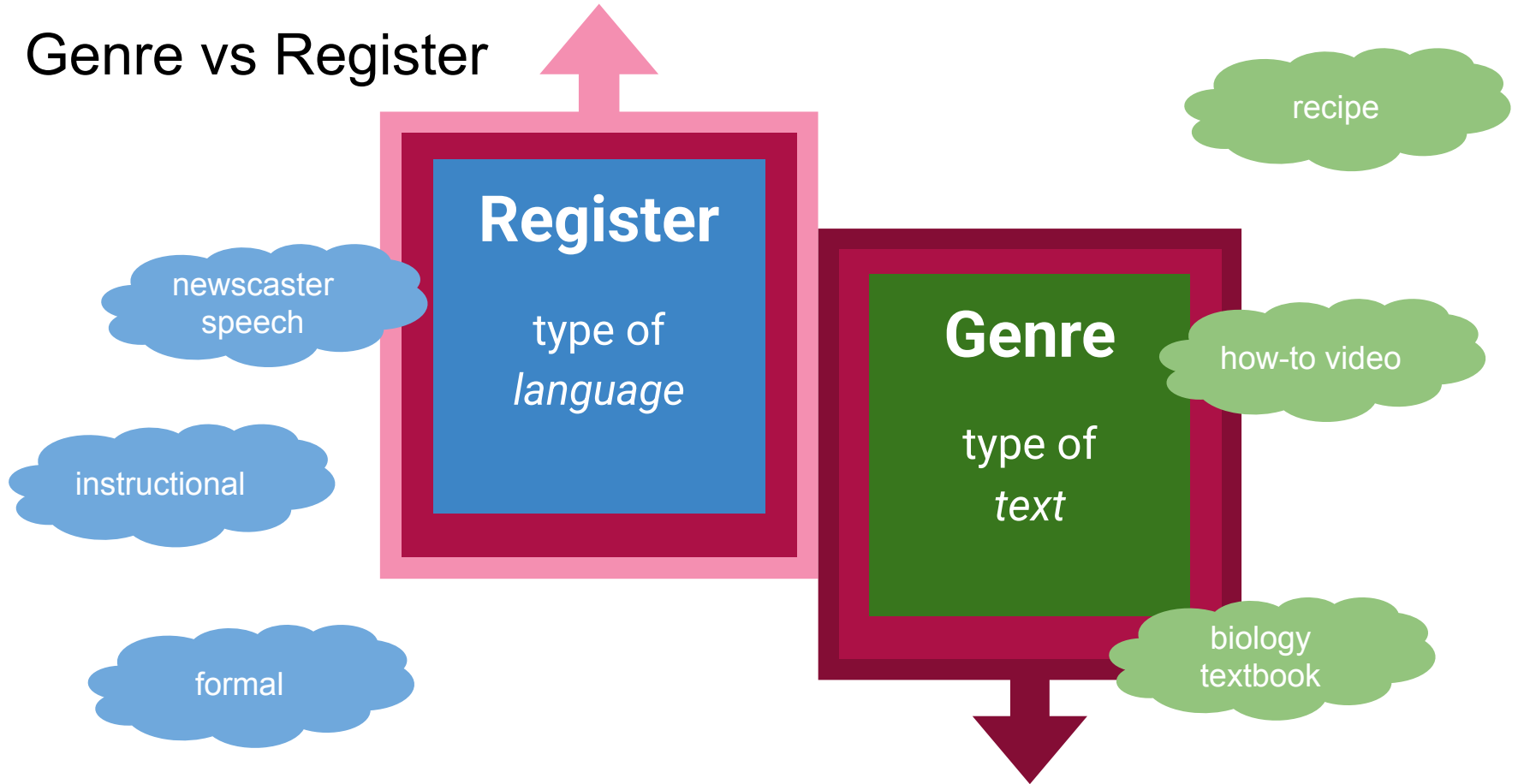
Register: linguistic features that mark communicative situations in particular social setting. (primarily non-literary situations)

Genre: a structure common for groups of texts which are recognized as performing broadly similar functions in a society

Dialect: a variety of a language spoken by a particular group of people. There are standard and nonstandard dialects.

Language: a mutually intelligible system of signs with grammar and vocabulary, not mutually intelligible with other languages

Genre vs Register



Features of Genre / Register

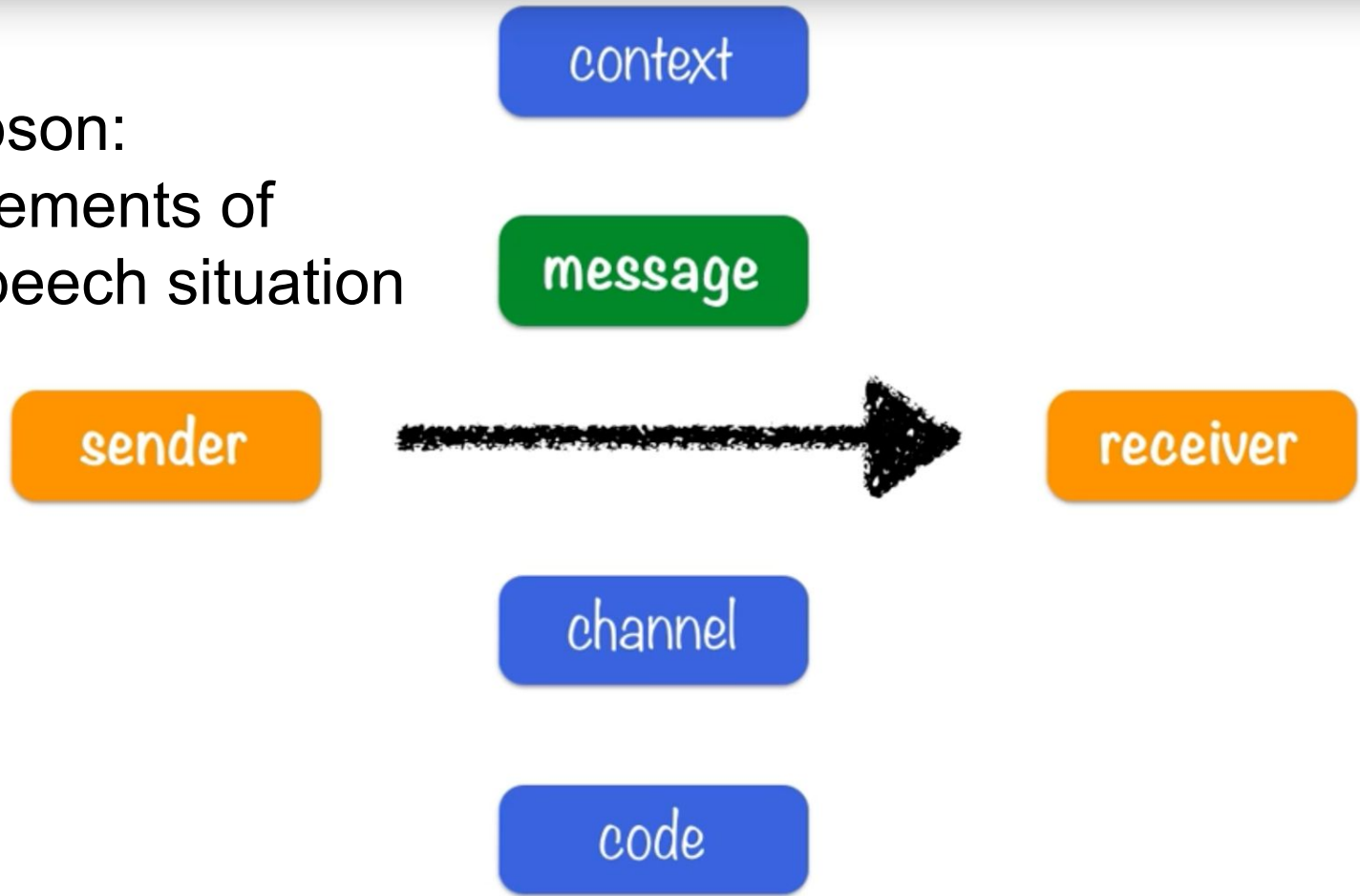
What are some features of a recipe?

Features of Genre / Register

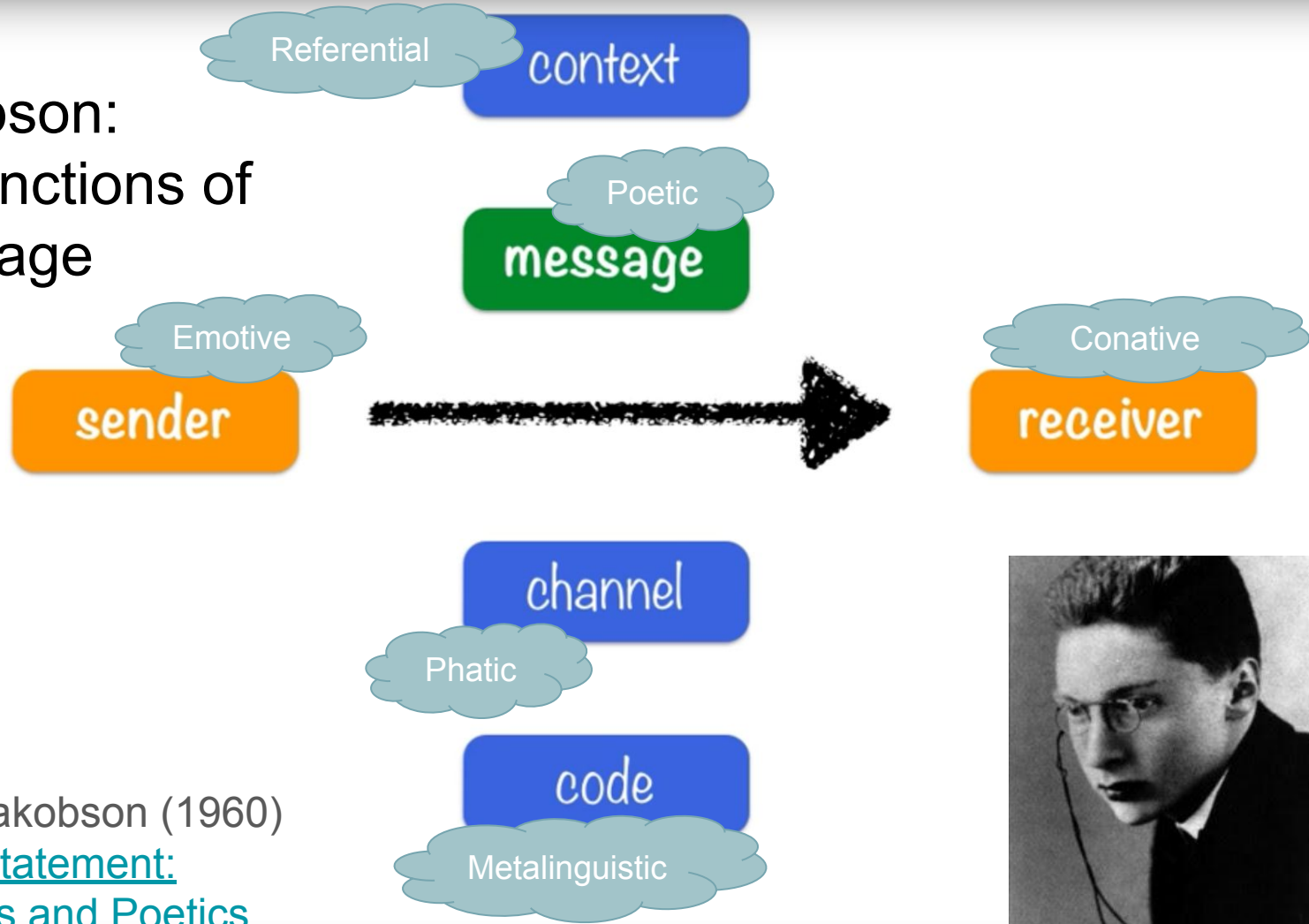
What are some features of a recipe?

- in an instructional register

Jakobson:
Six elements of
the speech situation



Jakobson: Six functions of language



Roman Jakobson (1960)

Closing Statement:
Linguistics and Poetics



Speech Act Theory

Question: What does “I promise” mean?

Question: What are some things people *do* with language?

We've mentioned a few:

- persuade
- inform
- build relationships
- ...what else?

How to Do Things with Words (JL Austin, 1955)

Utterances *usually* mean much more than what they say (referential function). In fact, many (if not most) **utterances are also actions**

Performatives

- I (hereby) *christen* this ship Boaty McBoatface.
- I *pronounce* you man and wife.
- I *second* that motion.
- I *bet* you five dollars the Lakers will win the NBA championship next year.

Speech Act Theory

Direct Speech Acts

Indirect Speech Acts

Speech Act Theory

If you think about 'informing someone' as an act, we can start to think of *all* utterances as speech acts.

Common speech acts: informing, reminding, inviting, complaining, refusing, accepting, requesting, commanding.

Why is the idea of indirect speech acts important for a chatbot?

Speech Act Theory

Why is this important for chatbots?

To recognize that utterances may not be exactly what they seem

Some standard patterns:

- use of questions to stand for commands
- use of objectively unnecessary, informative statements to stand for requests (e.g., using “you are blocking my view” vs. “please move so I can see”)

How do we understand / interpret indirect speech acts correctly?

“I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that”



HAL *can* open the pod bay doors. So what is he doing?

H. Paul Grice

Foundational thinker in the discipline of **pragmatics**.

Cooperative Principle: "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." ([Grice 1989: 26](#)).

Conversational Maxims

H. Paul Grice (1975)

1. **The maxim of quantity**, where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.
2. **The maxim of quality**, where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.
3. **The maxim of relation**, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.
4. **The maxim of manner**, when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.

Some rules...

Tom Scott calls these the "rules" of conversation.

What do you think? Are they mandatory?

Some rules are meant to be broken

People often **flout** the conversational maxims. In fact, we usually aren't aware of the maxims at all until they are not being followed (or if our interlocutor is a really bad liar).

But people are remarkably accommodating (depending on the circumstances—remember Handman on interpreting disfluencies). What happens to the conversation when a maxim is flouted?

An Example from Grice

“A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc." [\(Grice 1989: 33\)](#)

Quantity

Be exactly as informative as is required.

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quantity

Be exactly as informative as is required.

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

A:How many ice cream sandwiches do you have left?

B:Two (when you have three)

Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- Do not say what you believe to be false
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- Do not say what you believe to be false
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

A: Did you hear that Geraldine was backstage at Billie Eilish concert?

B: Sure did. Did you hear I have an audience with the Pope next week?

Relevance (“Relation”)

Be relevant.

A: Is Glen dating anyone these days?

B: Well, they do drive to Dallas every weekend.

Manner

Be perspicuous (easy to understand).

- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- Be orderly
- Avoid obscurity of expression
 - In other words, avoid jargon when it's not a part of the common ground, e.g., words like *perspicuity* or *prolixity*

Manner

Be perspicuous (easy to understand).

- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- Be orderly
- Avoid obscurity of expression
 - In other words, avoid jargon when it's not a part of the common ground, e.g., words like *perspicuity* or *prolixity*

A: Did you hear X's lecture?

B: I listened to X produce a series of sounds that corresponded closely with words of the English language.

Which Maxim(s) is/are at work here?

A: “When are you going to pay me back?”

B: “Boy, it’s hot in here!”

Which Maxim(s) is/are at work here?

"OMG the homework took me a million yeaars"

Which Maxim(s) is/are at work here?

“I come home last night, and there’s a car in the dining room. I said to my son, “How did you get the car in the dining room?” He said, “It was easy. I made a left turn when I came out of the kitchen.”

Which Maxim(s) is/are at work here?

Solicitor at the door: Is your mother/father at home?

Child: Yes.

Solicitor: May I talk to them?

Child: They aren't here.

Solicitor: But you just said they were at home.

Child: She is. This isn't our house.

Which Maxim(s) is/are at work here?

An elevator somewhere in the UK had a sign inside it that says:

"Please do not pee in the elevator and cover it with rubbish."

Collaboration in conversation

Collaboration in conversation

The speaker and the listener must manage the following processes, in real-time:

1. Speaking and listening in an orderly way, without talking over each other more than is acceptable.
2. Checking that the other person is understanding.
3. Fixing confusions and misunderstandings before they cause the conversation to break down.

Structure of Conversation

People do not necessarily speak in sentences

Utterances: basic unit of conversation

- may span over several turns
- may have several utterances within one turn

AGENT: Yeah yeah the um let me see here we've got you on American flight nine thirty eight

CUSTOMER: Yep.

AGENT: leaving on the twentieth of June out of Orange County John Wayne Airport at seven thirty p.m.

CUSTOMER: Seven thirty.

AGENT: and into uh San Francisco at eight fifty seven.

The Structure of Conversation

- (1) Ann Should we put this in, this,
 this little like kinda cross bar,
 like the T? like the I bar?
- Burton Yeah ([we can do that]).
- Ann So, you wanna stick the
 ([screws in])? Or wait is, is,
 are these these things, or?
- Burton That's these things I bet.
 Because there's no screws.
- Ann Yeah, you're right. Yeah,
 probably. If they'll stay in.
- Burton I don't know how they'll stay
 in ([but]).
- Ann Right there.
- Burton Is this one big enough?
- Ann Oh ([xxx]) I guess cause like
 there's no other side for it to
 come out.
- Burton M-hm.
 [8.15 sec]
- Burton ([Now let's do this one]).
- Ann Okay.

The Structure of Conversation

Turn-taking: must know when it's the right time to contribute your turn

- Comes naturally to humans: overlaps and long pauses are actually somewhat rare

Adjacency pairs: **two-part conversational** structures where turn-taking is usually quite clear

- Question → answer
- Greeting → greeting
- Request → compliance
- Invitation → acceptance

- (1) Ann Should we put this in, this, this little like kinda cross bar, like the T? like the I bar?
- Burton Yeah ([we can do that]).
- Ann So, you wanna stick the ([screws in])? Or wait is, is, are these these things, or?
- Burton That's these things I bet. Because there's no screws.
- Ann Yeah, you're right. Yeah, probably. If they'll stay in.
- Burton I don't know how they'll stay in ([but]).
- Ann Right there.
- Burton Is this one big enough?
- Ann Oh ([xxx]) I guess cause like there's no other side for it to come out.
- Burton M-hm.
[8.15 sec]
- Burton ([Now let's do this one]).
- Ann Okay.

The Structure of Conversation

- Opening and Closing
 - Adjacency Pairs
 - Topic Management
 - Turn-Taking
 - Feedback
 - Repair
-
- Common ground (what are we constructing together?)

The Structure of Conversation: common ground

Common ground: the set of things which both speakers believe to be true of the conversation.

- AKA “universe of discourse”
- Gets updated throughout the conversation
- Part of classroom common ground is that we are on zoom in a linguistics class, that I am the teacher and yall are the students and there are certain expectations of each of use because of those roles.
- Not part of the common ground is where we all are in the world.
- People assess what others know before making a new contribution.

The speaker must know

1. **Why** they are saying something—what is their **goal**?
2. **What** to say to communicate that goal
 - a. How to choose an **utterance** that will best get that goal across to the listener
3. **How** to say it
 - a. Know when to employ different kinds of utterances such as direct vs indirect questions, statements, requests, etc.
 - b. Properly handle intonational changes, conventions of politeness, etc.

The listener must know

1. How to determine **what the speaker said**
 - a. Hearing, and breaking up the speech signal into words and phrases
2. How to **determine the meaning** of the utterance from its linguistic representation
3. How to infer the speaker's **goals** in saying what they said