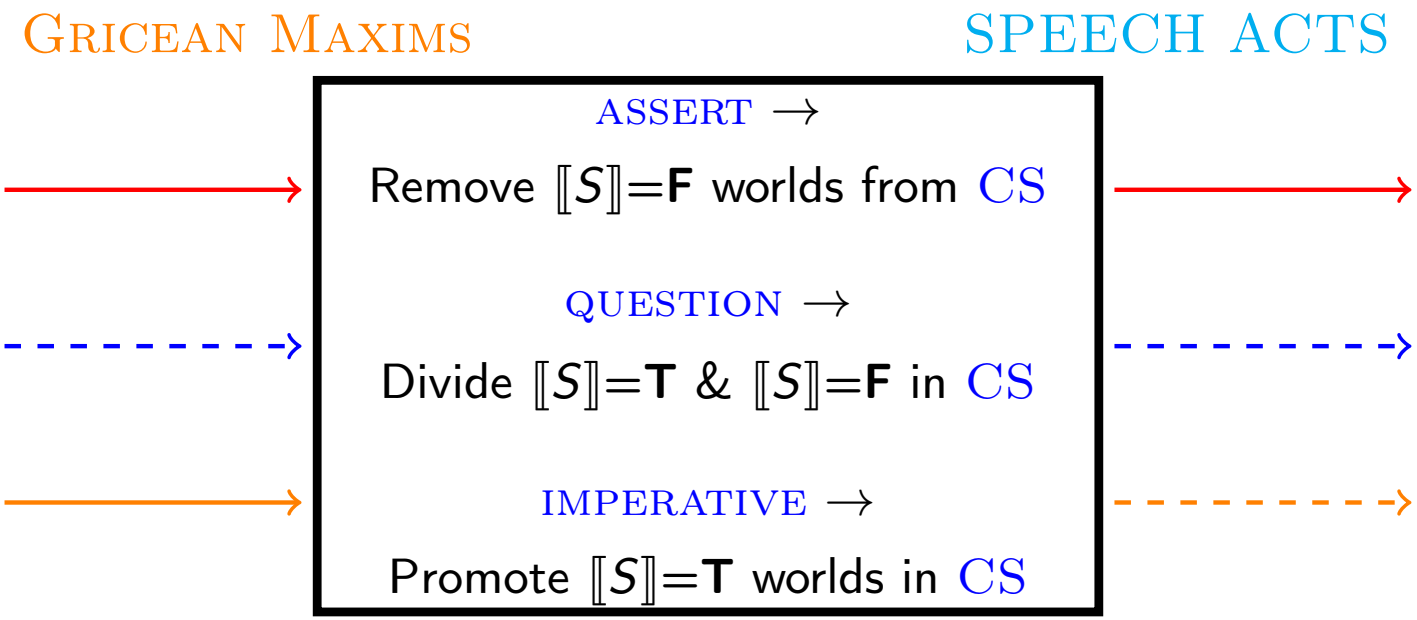
Patterns of Interpretation in Context



ELC 231: Introduction to Language and Linguistics

Dynamic Semantics & Pragmatics: Meaning as USE vs TRUTH

Dr. Meagan Louie

Core Subdomains

Linguistics: The study of Language

- Phonetics
- Phonology
- Morphology
- Syntax
- Semantics
- Pragmatics

Core Subdomains: Last Week - Syntax and Semantics

Linguistics: The study of Language

- Phonetics
- Phonology
- Morphology
- **Syntax**
- **Semantics**
- Pragmatics

Core Subdomains: This Week - Semantics and Pragmatics

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- Phonetics
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- **Pragmatics**

Core Subdomains: Semantics

- **Semantics:** The study of **MEANING** in language

1 **Review:** Meaning as Truth and reference

2 **REVIEW:** Compositionality

3 A Semantic Interpretation System for Language

(i) The Model/Ontology
(ii) Lexical Entries
(iii) Compositional Rules (i.e., how to semantically interpret PSRs)

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  (i) what "Scout," "Jem" and "Maycomb County" **refer** to, and

  (ii) how to categorize $\langle$**individual**$_{\mathbf{x}}$, **place**$_{\mathbf{y}}\rangle$ pairs according to whether *x lives in y* or *x doesn't live in y*

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Q: But are TRUTH and REFERENCE all there is to meaning?

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(2) a. That lady says Atticus has been teaching me to read.

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Context: *Scout's first-grade teacher disapproves of the fact that Scout already knows how to read, and tells Scout that her father must stop teaching her. Scout complains to Jem:*

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Observations:

(i) "that lady" and "that damn lady" refer to the same individual (Scout's teacher)

(ii) (2a) and (2b) have the same TRUTH-CONDITIONS

- **...but our intuition is that they have different meanings**

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(3) a. I broke your tea cup.

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Observation:

- Assuming "I" and "your tea cup" refer to the same individuals in both (2a) and (2b)...
- ...(2a) and (3b) have the same TRUTH-CONDITIONS
- **...but are (2a) and (2b) exactly the same?**

Q: What's going on? TRUTH vs USE-Conditions

EXAMPLE

(4) a. Jack ordered fries and a burger.

b. **That bastard** Jack ordered fries and a burger.

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- "Jack" and "that bastard Jack" refer to the same individual (say **j**)
- These sentences have the same TRUTH-CONDITIONS:

  = **T** iff **j**∈{x|x ordered fries and a burger}
  (The individual that "Jack" refers to (**j**) is a member of the set of individuals who ordered fries and a burger)

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(4a), (4b) = **T** iff **j**∈{x|x ordered fries and a burger} - e.g.,

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So how are these different?

(5) a. Jack ordered fries and a burger.

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(4a) ✓ (4b) ✓

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CONTEXT 1: Jack is a jerk who kicks puppies and spits on children.
(4a) ✓ (4b) ✓

CONTEXT 2: Jack is a colleague who seems very nice. (4a) ✓ (4b) ✗

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CONTEXT 1: Jack is a jerk who kicks puppies and spits on children.
(4a) ✓ (4b) ✓

CONTEXT 2: Jack is a colleague who seems very nice. (4a) ✓ (4b) ✗

CONTEXT 3: Jack is an okay guy, but I'm on a diet, and resent his eating a burger and fries while I eat an unsatisfying salad.
(4a) ✓ (4b) ✓

CONTEXT OF USE for "that bastard"

EXAMPLE

(5b) **CONTEXT 2:** Jack is a colleague who seems very nice.

That bastard Jack ordered fries and a burger.

- **Observation:** I can use "Jack" to refer to **j** in any context

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- **Observation:** I can use "Jack" to refer to **j** in any context
- "That bastard Jack" should only be used in *particular contexts*

  i.e., contexts where I have ill-will towards **j**

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- We'll assume that these are just different dimensions of meaning

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CONTEXT 1: I just dropped the tea cup you lent me to use. You bought that tea cup for 20 baht from a market. (3a) ✓ (3b) ✓

CONTEXT 2: I just dropped the tea cup you lent me to use. The tea cup was 500-year old Qing dynasty porcelain that emperors drank from, worth over 30 mil. USD. (3a) ✓ (3b) ✗

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- **Kaplan (1999):** "oops" has the following USE-CONDITIONS:

  "[the speaker] has just observed a minor mishap"

Note: "mishap" = unlucky accident

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  Note: "mishap" = unlucky accident
- (4b) is inappropriate in Context 2, because the mishap is not minor

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- "'oops" is even worse in contexts where no mishap has occurred

  eg., if the observed incident is **on purpose**, or not unlucky

EXAMPLE

(5) **Context**: *I finally submit my dissertation, after spending three years writing it.*

Oops.

CONTEXT OF USE for "oops"

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EXAMPLE

(6) **Context**: *I invented a cure for cancer, though I was just trying to invent a new kind of allergy medicine.*

Oops.

Linguistic Subfields: Pragmatics

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  - (iii) truth-conditional content (i.e., semantic meaning)

    AND
  - (iv) use-conditional content (i.e., pragmatic meaning)

- **Pragmatics** is the study of language in context
  - (i) The non truth-conditional meanings of words, phrases and sentences
  - (ii) How these meanings interact with context
  - (iii) how these meanings interact with truth-conditional meaning
  - (iv) etc.

Investigating USE-CONDITIONS: คุณ /kʰuːn^{M}/ vs เธอ /tʰəː^{M}/

- **Research Question A:**

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Investigating USE-CONDITIONS: เลย /lə:j^{M}/

- **Research Question B:**
  1. What is the difference between a sentence that has เลย /lə:j^{M}/ at the end, and one that does not?

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Investigating USE-CONDITIONS: หนอ /nɔː^{R}/

- **Research Question C:**
  1. What is the difference between a sentence that has หนอ /nɔː^{R}/ at the end, and one that does not?

Investigating USE-CONDITIONS: หนอ /nɔː^{R}/

- **Research Question C:**
  1. What is the difference between a sentence that has หนอ /nɔː^{R}/ at the end, and one that does not?
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Meaning as USE vs TRUTH: Speech Acts

BASIC INTUITION:

If you know what a sentence means, you know
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Q: Are TRUTH and REFERENCE all there is to meaning?

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- No! There are also USE-CONDITIONS
- Any other problems?

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- What are the TRUTH-CONDITIONS of the following utterances?

(7) a. Is butter a carb?

b. Where is Cady from?

c. What did Gretchen say?

d. Who is Karen talking to?

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- What are the TRUTH-CONDITIONS of the following utterances?

(8) a. Get in the car, loser (we're going shopping)

b. Do not hang out with her

c. Have a seat, please

d. Report to the gymnasium immediately!

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- QUESTIONS and IMPERATIVES/COMMANDS
  don't even have truth-conditions!

Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

QUESTIONS don't have truth-conditions:

You can't deny whether they are true or false

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Speaker A: Syria is in Africa

Speaker B: No it's not, you liar!

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Speaker A: Syria is in Africa

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(11) QUESTIONS don't have TRUTH-CONDITIONS

Speaker A: Where is Syria?

Speaker B: # No it's not, you liar!

Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

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Speaker A: Syria is in Africa

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(12) IMPERATIVES don't have TRUTH-CONDITIONS

Speaker A: Look up Syria on Wikipedia (please)!

Speaker B: # No it's not, you liar!

Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

- **Language lets you perform different kinds of SPEECH ACTS**

Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

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  1. ASSERTIONS

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Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

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- Different kinds of speech acts are often grammatically distinguished

Speech Acts: Utterances without TRUTH-CONDITIONS

- **Language lets you perform different kinds of SPEECH ACTS**
  1. ASSERTIONS
  2. QUESTIONS
  3. IMPERATIVES
- Different kinds of speech acts are often grammatically distinguished
- eg., languages often use different morphemes, or syntactic constructions for assertions/questions/imperatives

Grammatically-Marked Clause Types in ENGLISH

- **Languages often grammatically distinguish between different kinds of speech acts - this is called CLAUSE-TYPING**

(13) English VERB conjugation in different CLAUSE-TYPES

a. You ate a sandwich. — ASSERTION

b. Did you eat a sandwich? — Y/N QUESTION

c. What did you eat? — WH-QUESTION

d. Eat a sandwich (please)! — IMPERATIVE

Grammatically-Marked Clause Types in Blackfoot

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(14) Blackfoot Assertion

kítaahkayi
kit-waahkayi
2-go.home.vai
'You$_{sg}$ went home.'

(15) Blackfoot Y/N Question

kikáta'waahkayihpa
kit-káta'-waahkayi-hpa
2-Y/N-go.home.vai-non.aff
'Did you$_{sg}$ go home?'

Grammatically-Marked Clause Types in Blackfoot

- **Languages often grammatically distinguish between different kinds of speech acts - this is called CLAUSE-TYPING**

(16) Blackfoot Assertion

kítaahkayi
kit-waahkayi
2-go.home.vai

'You$_{sg}$ went home.'

(17) Blackfoot Wh Question

takáa aahkayiwa
takáa waahkayi-wa
who go.home.vai-3s

'Who **(is the one that)** went home?'

Grammatically-Marked Clause Types in Blackfoot

- **Languages often grammatically distinguish between different kinds of speech acts - this is called CLAUSE-TYPING**

(16) Blackfoot Assertion

kítaahkayi
kit-waahkayi
2-go.home.vai
'You$_{sg}$ went home.'

(18) Blackfoot Imperative

aahkayit
waahkayi-t
go.home.vai-impv:2sg
'Go home!'

Meaning as USE vs TRUTH: Speech Acts

BASIC INTUITION:

If you know what a sentence means, you know
what the world would have to look like, in order for it to be true
(-i.e., its TRUTH-CONDITIONS)

Observation: QUESTIONS and IMPERATIVES
don't have truth-conditions

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...so how can we describe the MEANING of a question?
(or an imperative?)

Meaning as USE vs TRUTH: Speech Acts

- Language allows you to perform different kinds of SPEECH ACTS
  1. ASSERTIONS
  2. QUESTIONS
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  What action, exactly, are we doing when we utter these?

  i.e., what are we doing when we use language anyways?

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→ Different SPEECH ACTS modify the CONTEXT in different ways

Meaning as Context-Change Potential

Observation: Language is one way to share facts about the world

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- The goal is to help each other figure out which of these possible worlds is the ACTUAL WORLD
- We do this by *eliminating the worlds that we know are not real*

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- This decreasing set of POSSIBLE WORLDS (the CONTEXT SET) represents our *increasing state of knowledge*

In other words, it represents the SPEECH CONTEXT - i.e., what we know about the world and each other

Meaning as Context-Change Potential

SPEECH ACTS help change the CONTEXT SET

We don't all start off with the same information...

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We don't all start off with the same information...

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eg., "The rightmost peg is purple," tells your partner to eliminate worlds where the rightmost peg is not purple

Meaning as Context-Change Potential

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- QUESTIONS divide up the possible worlds, and request your partner to indicate which ones should be eliminated

  eg., "Is the rightmost peg is purple?" divides the possibilities up into two sets: **A**={w|rightmost peg is purple in w} and **B**={w|rightmost peg is not purple in w} and asks your partner assert which should be eliminated

Meaning as Context-Change Potential

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- IMPERATIVES divide up possible future worlds into sets, and indicates a preference for one set

  eg., "Make the rightmost peg purple!" divides the possibilities up into two sets: **A**={w|rightmost peg is purple in w} and **B**={w|rightmost peg is not purple in w} and tells your partner that **A** >**B**

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1. ASSERTIONS: Remove worlds from CONTEXT SET
2. QUESTIONS: Divide worlds in CONTEXT SET; request assertion
3. IMPERATIVE: Divide future worlds in CONTEXT SET; indicate preference

Truth-conditional content instructs us
how to divide up and remove worlds

Speech Acts: Direct VS Indirect

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  - DIRECT SPEECH ACTS involve a match between
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  - indirect speech acts involve a MISMATCH

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

EXAMPLE

(19) **CONTEXT:** *It's really cold in the room, and I notice you're close to the air-conditioning control panel.*

Can you turn down the air-conditioning?

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

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Can you turn down the air-conditioning?

- **Grammatical Form:** Question

  "Can you turn down the air-conditioning"?

- **Intended Action:** Command/Request

  (Please turn down the air-conditioning!)

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

EXAMPLE

(20) **CONTEXT:** *My brother is playing music at top-volume. My dad comes in, looks at him and says:*

That's too loud.

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That's too loud.

- **Grammatical Form:** Assertion

  "That's too loud."

- **Intended Action:** Command

  (Turn down your music!)

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

EXAMPLE - Rhetorical Question

(21) **Speaker 1:**

If Batman's parents were murdered, how was he even born?

Speaker 2:

Are you an idiot?

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If Batman's parents were murdered, how was he even born?

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Are you an idiot?

- **Grammatical Form:** Question

  "Are you an idiot?"

- **Intended Action:** Assertion

  (That's a stupid question/You are an idiot.)

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

(Simpsons example from Heidi Harley's HeiDeas blog)

EXAMPLE - Rhetorical Question (Exception that proves the rule)

(22) **Context:** *Homer and Marge have just learned that Lurleen's dad walked out on his family when she was a child.*

Homer: How could a man just abandon his family? By which I mean, what is the method he would use, and could anyone do it?

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- **Grammatical Form:** Question

  "How could a man just abandon his family?"

- **Initial Interpretation of Intended Action:** Assertion

  (I can't imagine taking such a terrible action.)

Speech Acts: Direct VS Indirect

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  - indirect speech acts involve a mismatch
  - **Q:** How do we know that there's a mismatch?
    i.e., how do we know what the speaker's intended action is?

LANGUAGE as a SYSTEM OF RULES

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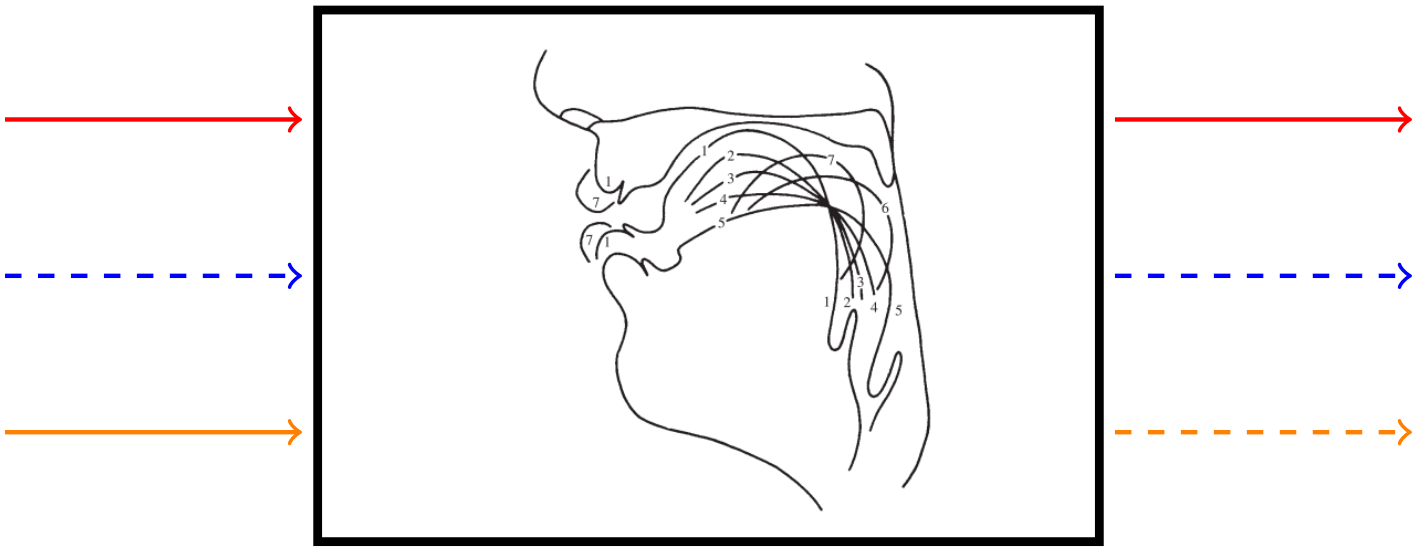

→ Phonetic/Articulatory Rules (how to produce speech sounds)

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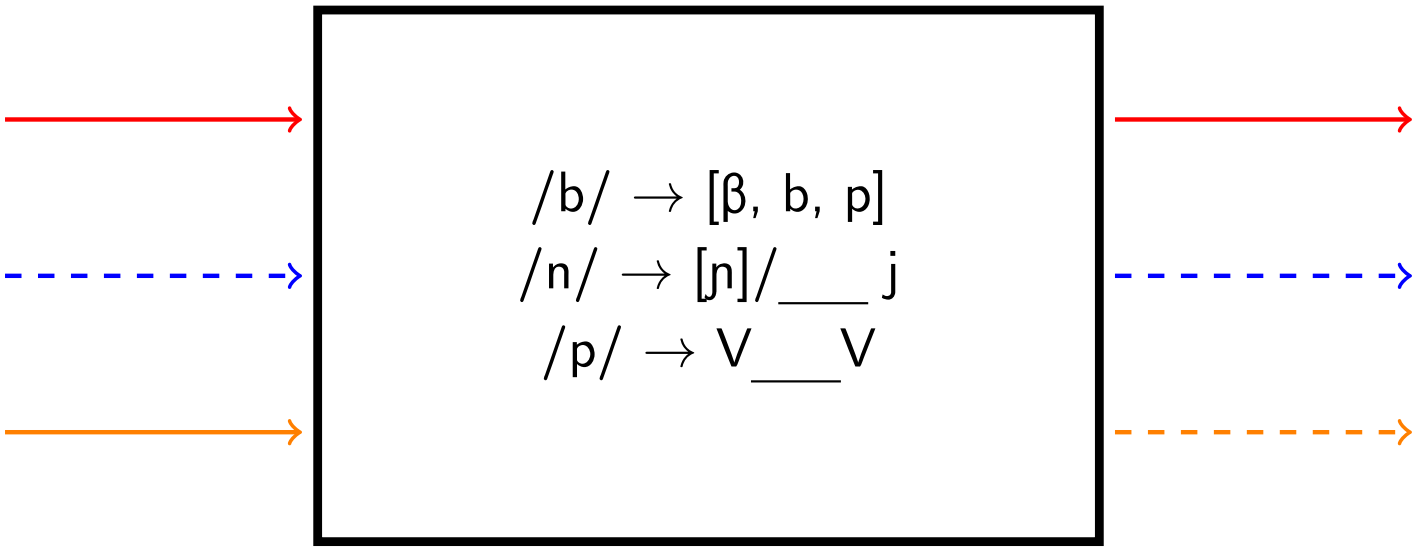

→ Phonological Rules (how phonemes are pronounced in context)

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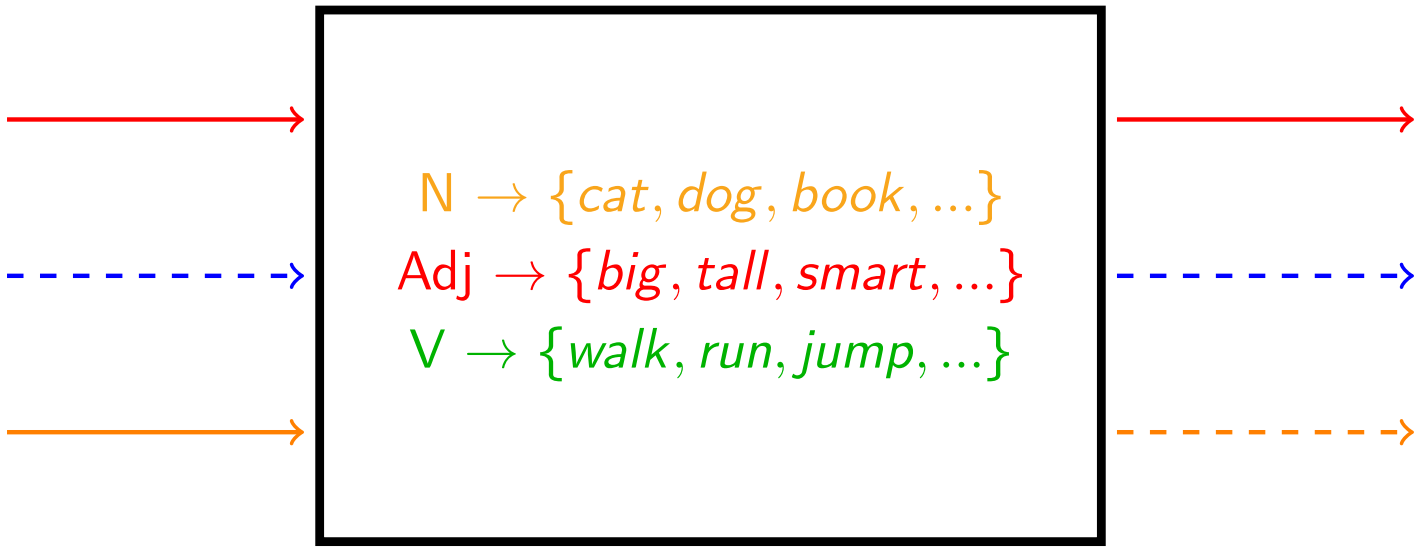

→ Lexical Rules (which morphemes are in which lexical category)

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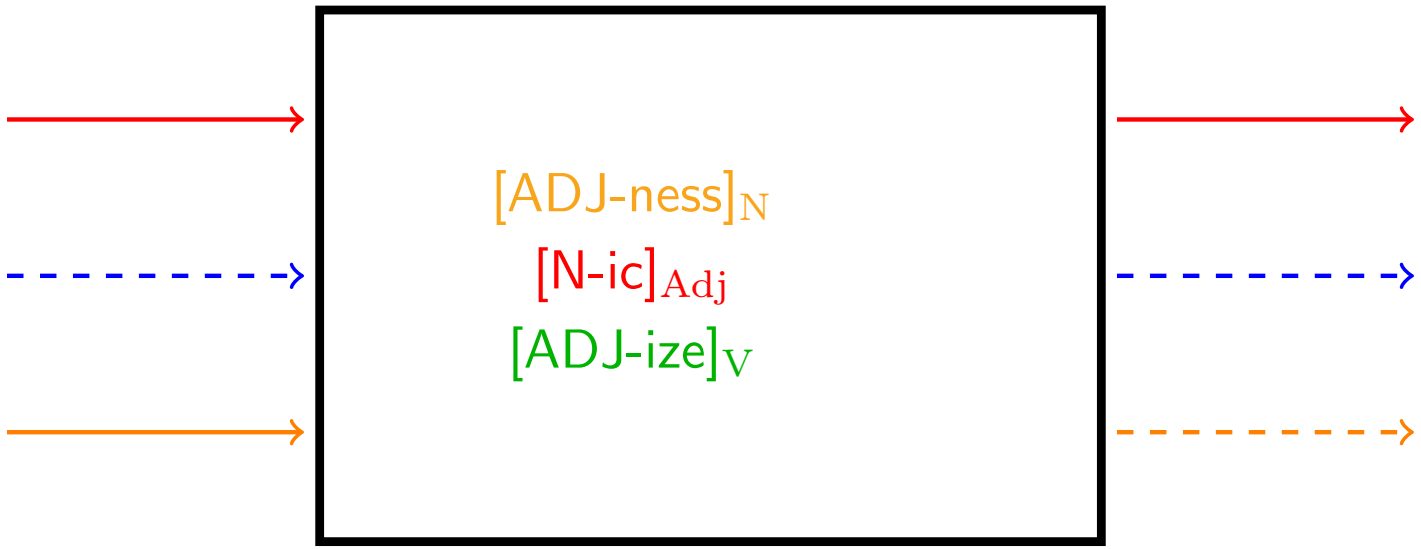

→ Morphological Rules (how to create words)

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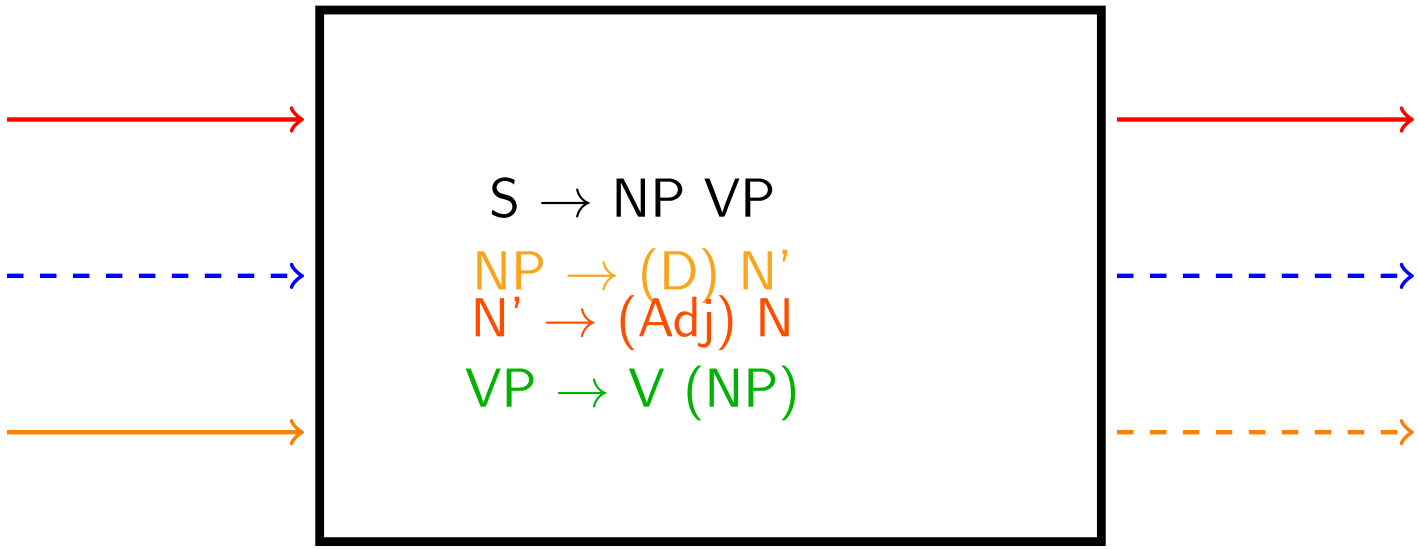

→ Phrase-Structure Rules (how to create sentences)

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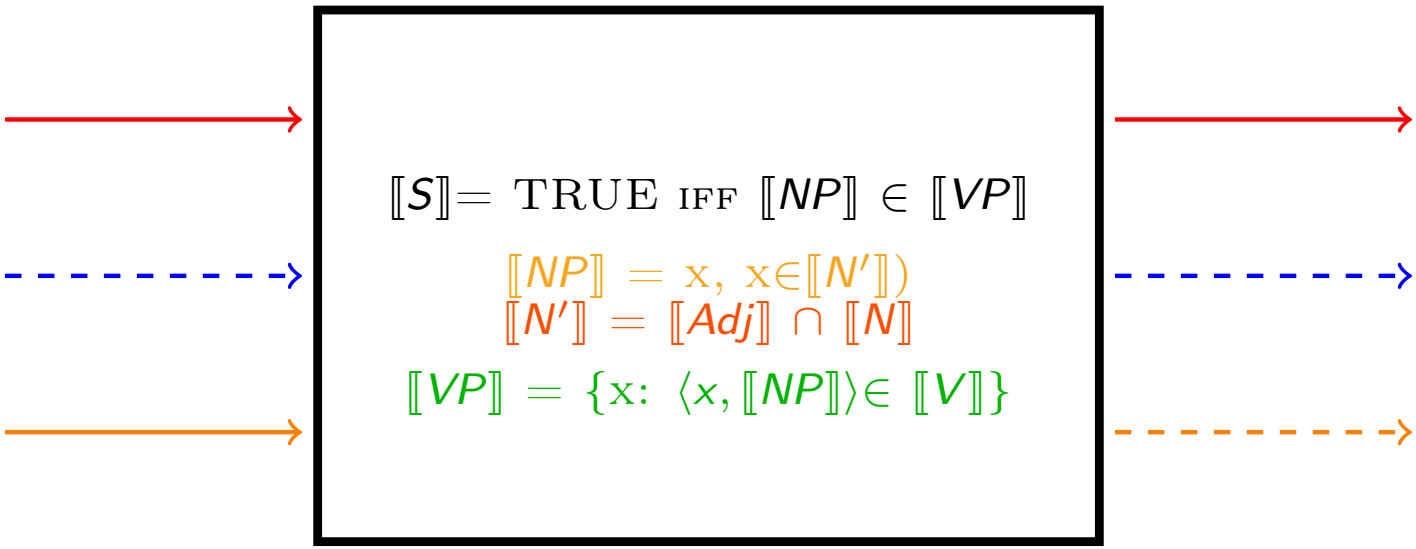

$\rightarrow$ Semantic Compositional Rules (how to interpret sentences)

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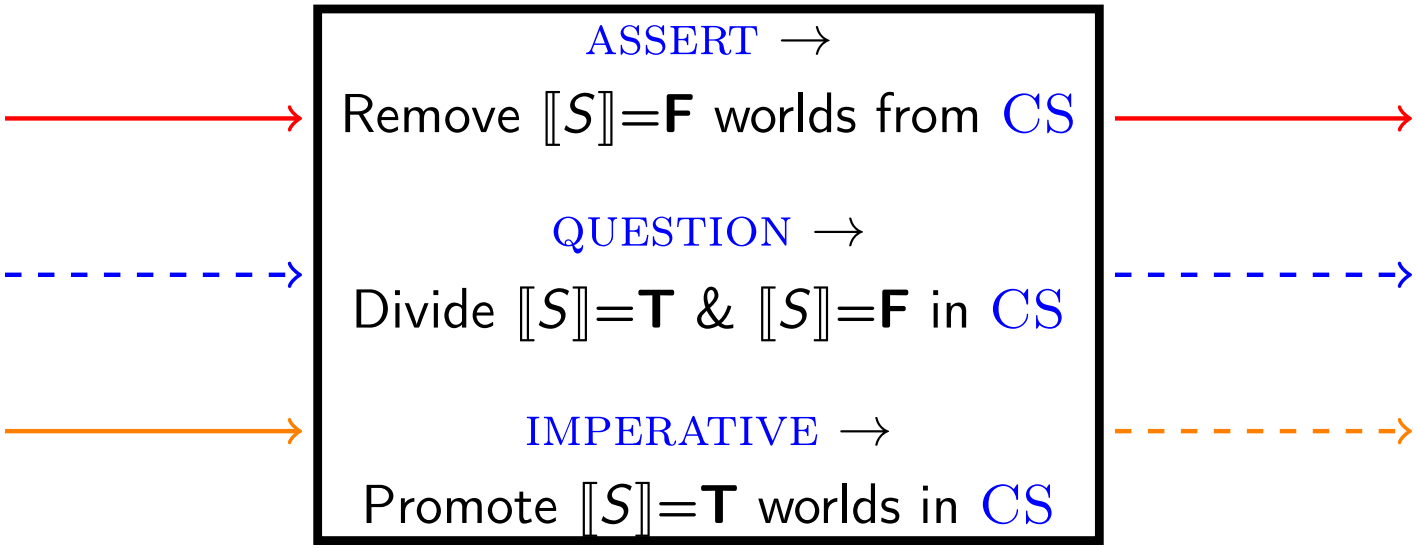

→ Semantic Context-Change Rules (how to interpret speech acts)

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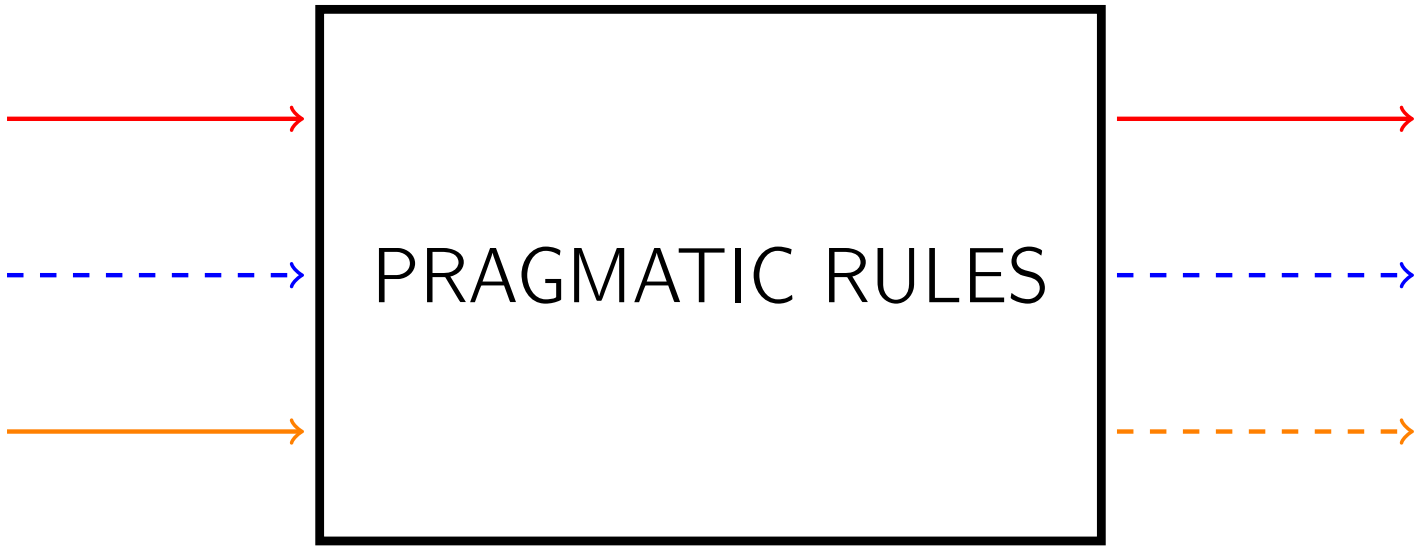

→ Some pragmatic rules are associated with particular lexical items
(eg., "oops," "ouch," "damn")

LANGUAGE as a SYSTEM OF RULES

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→ But there are also more general pragmatic rules for conversation

LANGUAGE as a SYSTEM OF RULES

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→ The assumption that the speaker is following these general pragmatic rules leads us to properly interpret INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Pragmatic Rules of Conversation

Gricean Maxims - The Cooperative Principle

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Example of an Gricean Maxim VIOLATION

Maxim of QUALITY Violated

QUALITY - Only say what you think is (justifiably) true!

Example (Part 1/2)

Context: *Cady, Damian and Janice are plotting a way to ruin Regina George - step one is to make her gain a lot of weight.*

Damian: What are Kälteen bars?

Cady: They're these weird Swedish nutrition bars. My mom used to give them to the kids in Africa to help them gain weight.

. [Mean Girls. 2004.]

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Example (Part 2/2)

Context: *Cady, Damian and Janice are plotting a way to ruin Regina George - step one is to make her gain a lot of weight.*

(The next day)

Cady: *(to Regina)* They're these weird nutrition bars my mom uses to lose weight....Yeah, you know, there's some weird ingredient in them ... It burns carbs. It just burns up all your carbs.

.

[Mean Girls. 2004.]

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Example

Context: *Regina is on an all-carb diet, because Cady convinced her that the supplements she's eating will burn through carbs.*

Regina: Is butter a carb?

Cady: Um....yes!

.

[Mean Girls. 2004.]

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Maxim of QUALITY Violated

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. [Mean Girls. 2004.]

→ The reason why Cady can trick Regina is because Regina assumes that Cady is following Grice's maxim of QUALITY

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Example: Too Much Information

Context: *At Christmas time, students at Northshore Highschool can send other students candy canes. Damian and Cady send one to Cady to make Gretchen insecure.*

Damian: Ho ho ho! Candy Cane Grams! ...Taylor Zimmerman, two for you. Glen Coco, four for you, you go Glen Coco. And Cady Heron, here you go Cady Heron ...and none for Gretchen Weiners. Bye.

. [Mean Girls. 2004.]

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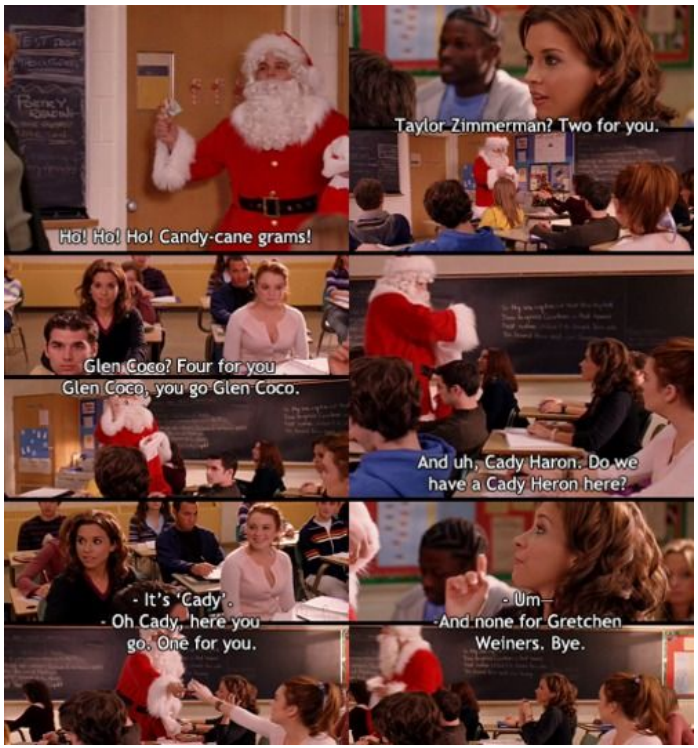

→ Adding "And none for Gretchen Weiners" is totally unnecessary in the context!

It's already clear that if your name isn't mentioned, you didn't get a candy cane.

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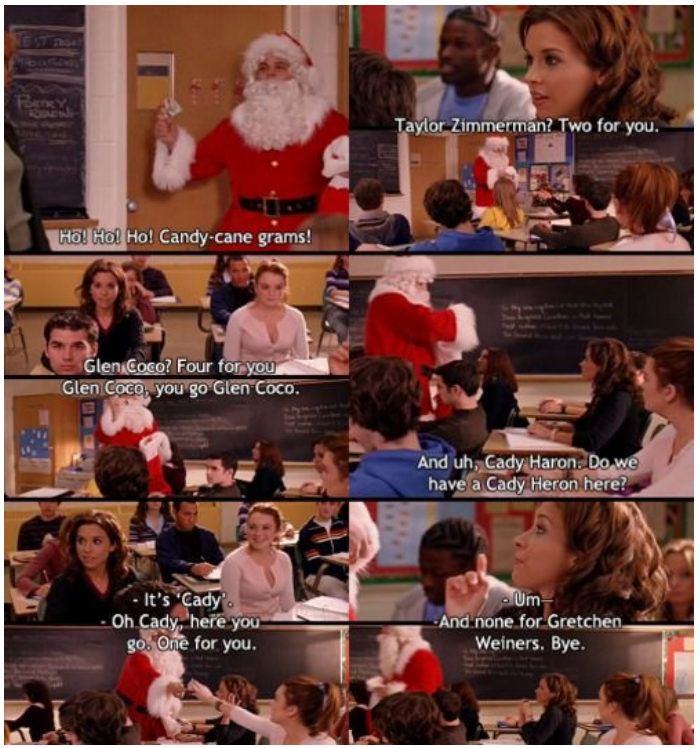

This violation of QUANTITY only serves to clarify the main character's scheme to the movie audience, which is why it's funny.

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Example: Too Much Information

Context: *Steve Carrell and Stephen Colbert are debating the merits of Halloween. Steve is trying to convince Stephen that Halloween is just harmless fun.*

Steve Carell: Come on Stephen, it's about kids dressing up one night a year, ringing doorbells for treats, and when you don't get what you want, you toilet paper the house. Maybe soap some windows, or set a few fires. And then, drop a cement-filled pumpkin off the overpass, onto the windshield of an oncoming car. Stephen, it's about fun, it's about frolic, it's about candy. [The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (2000-10-30)]

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Steve Carell:... And then, drop a cement-filled pumpkin off the overpass, onto the windshield of an oncoming car..

→ Steve Carrell is providing way more detail than necessary to explain what kids do on Halloween!

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Steve Carell:... And then, drop a cement-filled pumpkin off the overpass, onto the windshield of an oncoming car..

→ Steve Carrell is providing way more detail than necessary to explain what kids do on Halloween!

It makes it sound like something (very dangerous) he does in particular, instead of something (harmless) that kids do in general!

Example of an Gricean Maxim VIOLATION

Maxim of QUANTITY Violated

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You can also find examples where QUANTITY is violated because someone provides too little information for the purposes of the conversation.

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Example of an Gricean Maxim VIOLATION

Maxim of RELEVANCE Violated

RELEVANCE - Be relevant!

Example

Context: Lilo has come to dance practice late, dripping puddles of water onto the stage. This causes all of the dancers to slip and fall.

Instructor: Lilo, why are you all wet?

Lilo: It's sandwich day.

[Lilo & Stitch, 2002]

Pragmatic Rules of Conversation

Gricean Maxims - The Cooperative Principle

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→ We generally assume that people follow these conversational rules

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Example of an Gricean Maxim VIOLATION

Maxim of MANNER Violated

MANNER - Be as clear, unambiguous, and brief as possible!

(Simpsons example from Heidi Harley's HeiDeas blog)

Example

Brother Faith: Now, correct me if I'm incorrect, but was I told that it's untrue that people in Springfield have no faith? Was I not misinformed?

Audience: (murmurs of puzzlement)

Brother Faith: The answer I'm looking for is 'Yes'.

. [Faith Off. 2000.]

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Flouting these maxims are often an indication that the speaker's grammatical utterance does not match their intended speech act...

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

EXAMPLE

(23) **CONTEXT:** *It's really cold in the room, and I notice you're close to the air-conditioning control panel.*

Can you turn down the air-conditioning?

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- But how is your ability to turn down the AC RELEVANT?

- **Intended Action:** Command/Request

  (Please turn down the air-conditioning!)

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

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(24) **CONTEXT:** *My brother is playing music at top-volume. My dad comes in, looks at him and says:*

That's too loud.

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

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- How is the volume of music RELEVANT to the speaker?
- **Intended Action:** Command

  (Turn down your music!)

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

EXAMPLE - Rhetorical Question

(25) **Speaker 1:**

If Batman's parents were murdered, how was he even born?

Speaker 2:

Are you an idiot?

Example of an INDIRECT SPEECH ACT

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EXAMPLE - Rhetorical Question

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Speaker 2:

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- **Grammatical Form:** Question

  "Are you an idiot?"

- How Speaker 1's idiocy RELEVANT?

- **Intended Action:** Assertion

  (That's a question only an idiot would ask.)

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$\rightarrow$ Whenever these seem to be violated, we try and re-interpret the conversation so that the Gricean Maxims are actually obeyed

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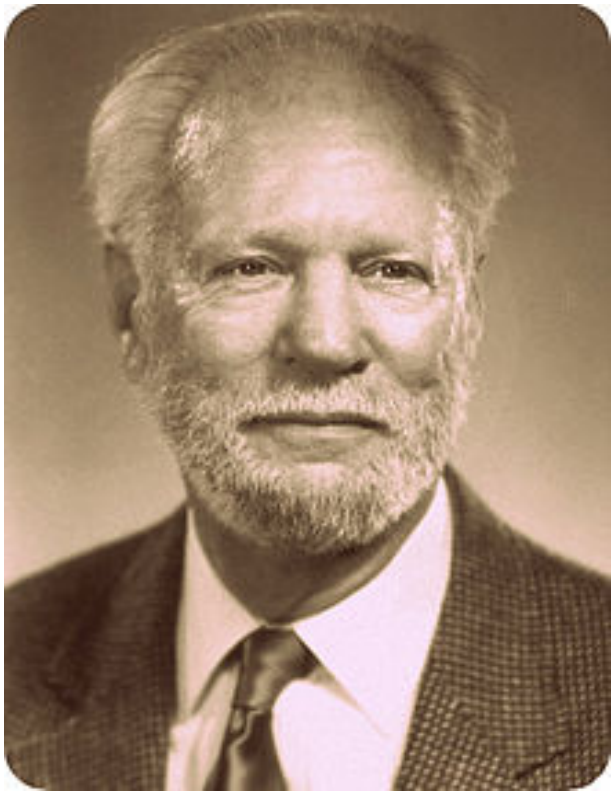
→ This rule of conversation is related to one of
Hockett's DESIGN FEATURES of language

Hockett's Design Features of Language

?

Q: What properties does LANGUAGE have?

i.e., what counts as a LANGUAGE (vs communication system)?



Hockett's Design Features

1. Discreteness
2. Semanticity
3. Arbitrariness
4. Productivity
5. Prevarication
6. Duality of Patterning
7. Displacement
8. ...

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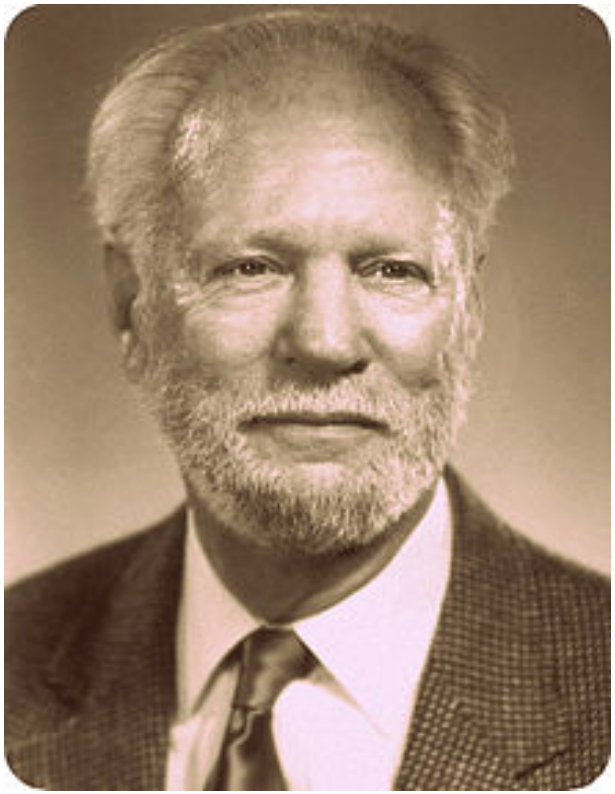

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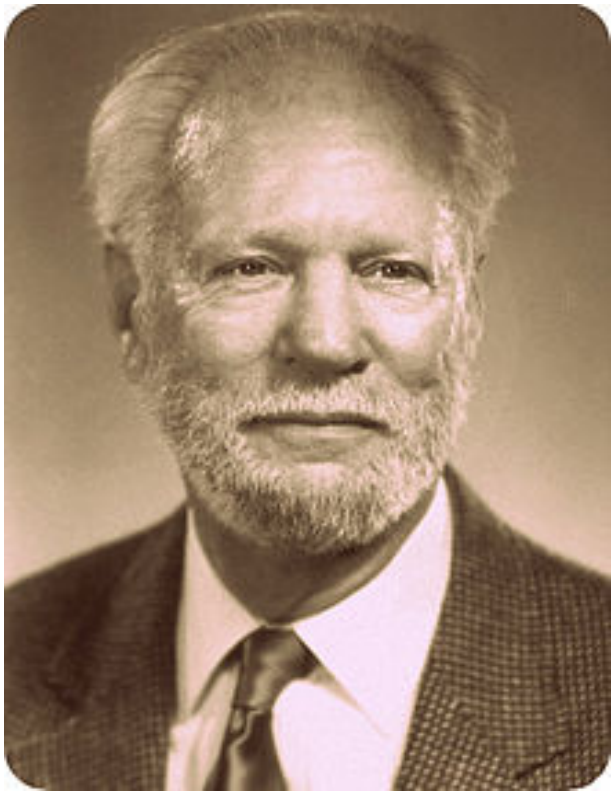

Hockett's Design Feature:
PREVARICATION

Language-users can make misleading, false or meaningless statements.

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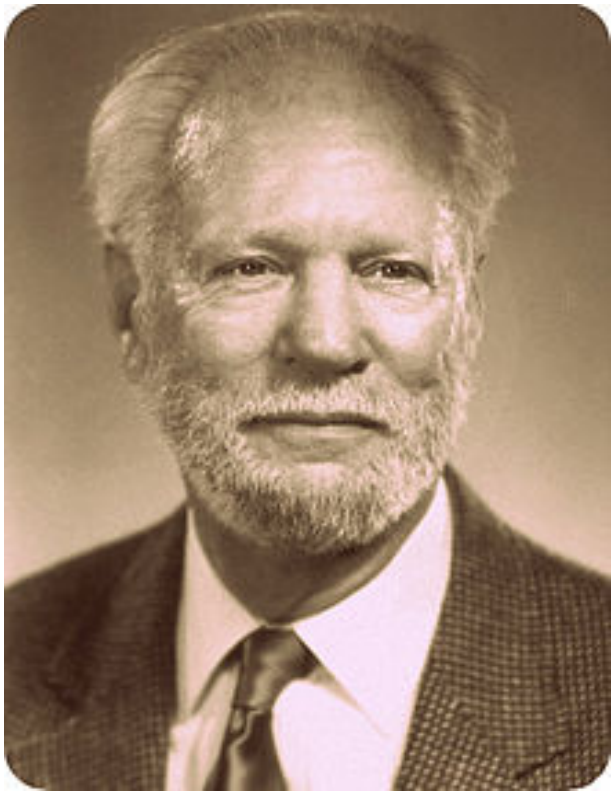

Hockett's Design Feature:

PREVARICATION

Context: My stomach is growling, but I don't have any money to buy food. Embarrassed, I say:

"I'm not hungry."

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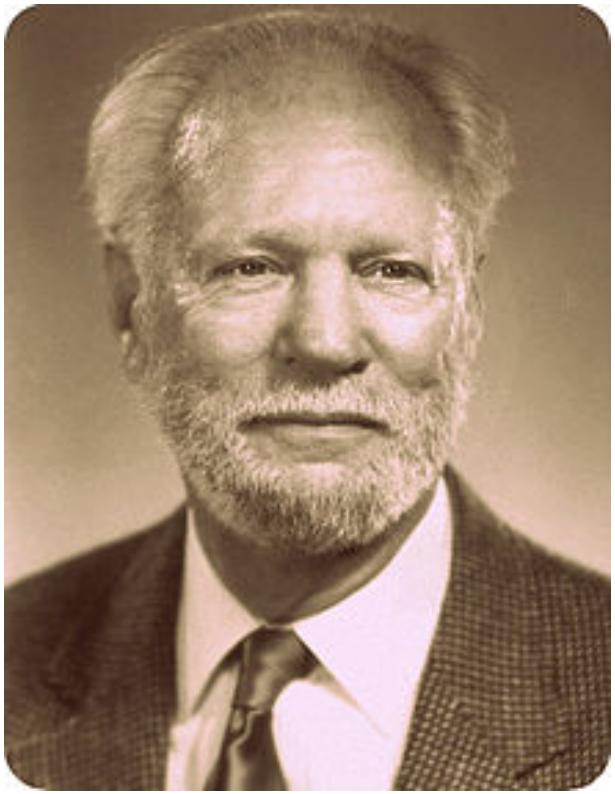

Hockett's Design Feature:
PREVARICATION

Context: Sweat is running down my face and my nose is running, but I don't want to admit I can't handle spicy food.

"It's not too spicy."

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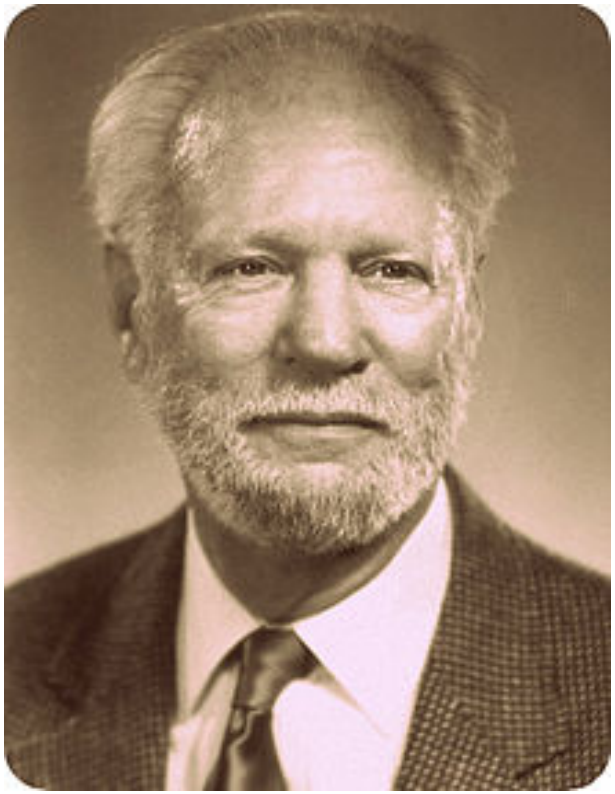

Hockett's Design Feature:
PREVARICATION

→ My stomach rumbling and sweating are ways of *communicating* information (i.e., my hunger, pathetic reaction to spicy food...)

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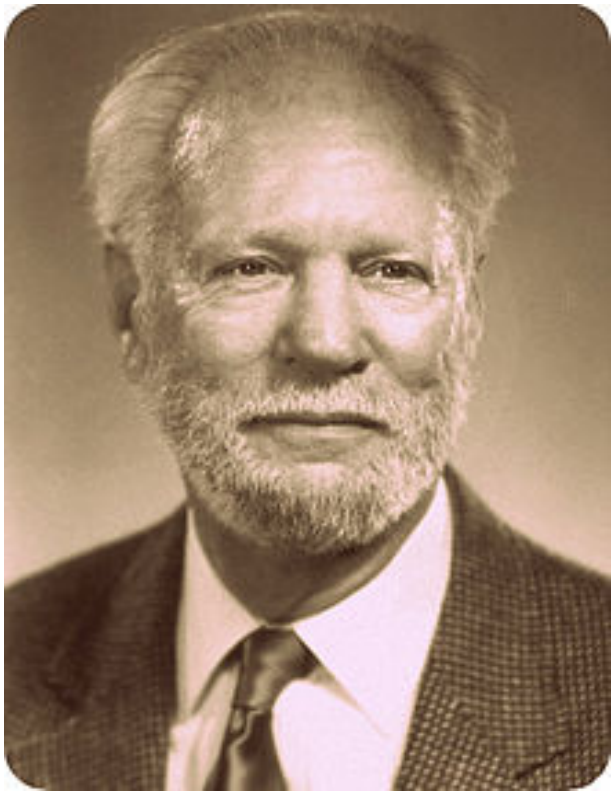

Hockett's Design Feature:
PREVARICATION

→ But unlike communication via LANGUAGE, this system of signals is **not** capable of prevarication

Next Week: Midterm Review Session

1. **Homework:** N/A this week (but think about A5: Semantics/Pragmatics)
2. **Instagram Homework:** N/A this week

References I

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Potts, Christopher. 2003. The Logic of Conventional Implicatures: University of California Santa Cruz dissertation.

Stalnaker, Robertc. 2013. 7. assertion. The Semantics-Pragmatics Boundary in Philosophy 179.