

# Introduction to English Linguistics

2. Semantics and Pragmatics IV  
17 October 2019

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## Some problems for truth-conditional semantics

- Non-declarative sentences: questions, imperatives.
- Analytic sentences (e.g. *War is war.*).
- Additional (implicit) meaning.  
A: Are you going to the seminar?  
B: It's on pragmatics.

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## Pragmatics: Meaning in context

- (1) A: Could you have a quick look at my printer – it's not working right.  
B: I have an appointment at eleven o'clock.

Context:

- Linguistic context.
- Non-linguistic context.
- Encyclopaedic knowledge.

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## Semantics vs. pragmatics

- **Semantics:** What words/sentences mean independently of context.
- **Pragmatics:** What speakers mean in the context of an utterance. → Inferences based on semantic meaning and the context.
- Inferences: Verbal vs. non-verbal communication.



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What is explicitly said:

### (1) Reference assignment and deixis

- (2) a. **Mary** hit **Tom** yesterday.  
b. **The maths teacher** hit **Tom** yesterday.  
c. **A teacher** hit **Tom** yesterday.  
d. **This teacher** hit **Tom** yesterday.  
e. **She** hit **him** yesterday.
- Different types of referring expressions:
    - ☐ Proper names.
    - ☐ Indefinite/definite noun phrases.
    - ☐ Demonstratives.
    - ☐ Pronouns.

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## Reference assignment and deixis

- Referring expressions differ in the way they are used. E.g.:
    - ☐ Proper names: Shared knowledge between speaker and listener.
    - ☐ Definite noun phrase: Referent is agreed upon by speaker and listener.
    - ☐ Indefinite noun phrase: No such assumption.
    - ☐ Pronouns: Context must provide the referent.
  - But cf. opening words in fiction.
- (3) a. At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting. (E. Hemingway, *Indian Camp*)  
b. She fascinated me. (T. Capote, *Dazzle*)

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## Reference assignment and deixis

- Apart from cases like (3b), the referent of a pronoun is always determined by the context. Two possibilities:
  - (4) a. A: My uncle came in. He looked tired.
  - b. A (*right after Bill left the room*): He looked tired.
    - **Anaphora**: Linguistic context (4a).
    - **Deixis**: Non-linguistic context (4b).
- **Deixis**: An expression whose interpretation is determined by the extralinguistic context of the utterance. → Pronouns, demonstratives, time deixis, place deixis (proximal vs. distal).

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## Reference assignment and deixis

- But: Reference assignment may not always be unambiguously determined by the context.

(all examples in (5): Dubinsky, S. and C. Holcomb. 2011. *Understanding Language through Humor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

(5) a.



- b. Artist: So what's your opinion of my painting?  
 Critic: It's worthless.  
 Artist: I know but I'd like to hear it anyway.

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## Reference assignment and deixis

- Issues related to deixis:
  - (5) c. A guy phones the local hospital and yells: "You've gotta help! My wife is in labor!" The nurse says: "Calm down. Is this her first child?" He replies: "No! This is her husband!"
  - d. Q: What is today if yesterday is tomorrow?  
 A: The day before yesterday.
  - e. A commenter is responding to a blog entry entitled "Don't call me NOW" : So does "Don't call me NOW" mean your *now* or my *now*? Because my *now* is around 11:30 while your *now* was at 9:51 which is my *then*. But by the time you read this and give me an answer my *now* will be your *then*, and your *now* I haven't even gotten to yet. And unless we happen to be looking at your website at the [same] time, this could go on forever.

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## What is explicitly said: (2) Disambiguation

- The role of context in disambiguation:
  - (7) a. I saw that gasoline can explode.
  - b. I saw that gasoline can explode, and a brand new gasoline can it was too.
- Context can sometimes mislead – intentional in riddles:
  - (8) Think of words ending in *-gry*. *Angry* and *hungry* are two of them. There are only three words in the English language. What is the third word? The word refers to something that everybody uses every day. If you have listened carefully, I've already told you what it is.

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## What is implicitly said: (1) Non-literal communication

- Implicit meaning: **Implicatures**.
- (9) a. *A and B leaving for a picnic, the sun is shining.*  
 A: It's a lovely day for a picnic.  
*Later – it starts raining.*  
 B: It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.
- b. An MIT linguistics professor was lecturing his class. "In English," he said, "a double negative forms a positive. However, in some languages, such as Russian, a double negative remains a negative. But there isn't a single language, not one, in which a double positive can express a negative." A voice from the back of the room piped up: "Yeah, right."
- (9): Irony.

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## Non-literal communication

- (10) a. His soul stretched tight across the skies.  
 (T. S. Elliott, *Preludes*)
- b. Output rose dramatically.
- c. Fatal accidents are well down on last year.
- (10): Metaphor.
- (11) a. The ham sandwich is waiting for his bill.
- b. The White House denied the accusations.
- c. Brexit: May humiliated by Salzburg ambush as she fights to save Chequers
- (11): Metonymy.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/20/may-in-fight-to-save-chequers-brexit-plan-after-salzburg-ambush>

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## Non-literal communication

- Non-literal expressions can become conventionalized to the point that speakers may no longer be fully aware of the literal meaning.
- (12) Some people urged more players to kneel or sit during the anthem at football stadiums on Sunday as a way to reinforce their First Amendment rights. **Others urged more white players to stand with black players who have knelt or sat during the anthem.**

(New York Times online, 23 September 2017, but the sentence was subsequently edited away – cf. <http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=34649#more-34649>)

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## What is implicitly said: (2) Indirect communication

- (13) a. "With Perez, the project will be obviously interesting for any coach," Wenger told French TV on Sunday. Asked whether he would be tempted, he replied: "I'm a coach."  
The Independent Online, 18 May 2009
- b. A: I hope you brought the bread and the cheese.  
B: I brought the cheese.
- c. A: Are you going to the seminar?  
B: It's on pragmatics.
- The literal meaning of B's utterance is maintained. But: Some additional meaning is communicated.
  - E.g. in (13c), the implicature in B's utterance could be 'yes' or 'no', depending on the context.

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## How does context-dependent interpretation work?

- Communication involves **inferential** (non-linguistic) **processes**.
- How are inferences determined?
- Grice's theory of conversation.  
*The Co-operative Principle (CP).*
  - Maxim of *quantity*.
  - Maxim of *relevance*.
  - Maxim of *manner*.
  - Maxim of *quality*.

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## The status of the CP and the maxims

- Grice's co-operative principle and the maxims describe what speakers generally expect from each other when they communicate.
- E.g. cases like (13) are not violations of the maxims, but by being indirect they provide some additional information.
- True violations are socially problematic:



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## The status of the CP and the maxims

- (14) b.
- One farmer met another and said, "Hey, Sam, my mule's got distemper. What'd you give yours when he had it?"
- "Turpentine," grunted Sam.
- A week later they met again and the first farmer shouted, "Sam, I gave my mule turpentine like you said and it killed him."
- "Did mine, too," nodded Sam.

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## Inference

- Inferential steps for (13c) – various premises leading to a conclusion:
  - B loves pragmatics. (encyclopaedic knowledge)
  - If someone likes pragmatics, he/she would be interested in seminars on pragmatics. (encyclopaedic knowledge)
  - The seminar is on pragmatics. (literal meaning)
  - ⇒ B is going to the seminar.

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## Relevance

- A listener looks for inferences up to a point where the statement becomes sufficiently relevant to her/him (cf. Relevance Theory).
- Not:  
(15) *Two psychoanalysts meeting on the street.*  
A: Good morning.  
B (*to himself*): I wonder what he meant by that.

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