

Pragmatics: Meaning and Doing

Introduction to Linguistics, Fall 2015

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Grice and conversational implicature

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- ▶ We can assume that our interlocutors are not speaking at random
- ▶ We can assume that our interlocutors are contributing with the aim of achieving some desired outcome of conversation (transfer of information, social nicety, etc)
- ▶ When the face (semantic) value of their contribution fails to measure up to these assumptions, we can reason about what they *mean*, rather than what they have *said*

The Gricean Maxims

(2) **Quality:**

- ▶ Do not say false things.
- ▶ Do not say things for which you lack evidence.

(3) **Quantity:**

- ▶ Make your contribution as informative as is required
- ▶ Do not say more than is required

(4) **Relation/Relevance:** Make your contribution relevant

(5) **Manner:**

- ▶ Avoid obscurity
- ▶ Avoid ambiguity
- ▶ Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- ▶ Be orderly

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(6) S: I think I'm going to win the Boston marathon this year!

H: Yup, and I'm the King of England.

Presupposition

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(7) P: Have you stopped beating your wife?

D: No!

P: So you're still beating her?

D: I never was!

(8) S: Did Jordan fail algebra again?

H: What do you mean? She only took it this year.

(9) “ ‘That woman who knew I had dyslexia—I never interviewed her.’ ”

(New York Times, September 16, 2000 – George W. Bush speaking of Gail Sheely)

Accommodation

(10) S: I need to leave work early today. I'm picking up my sister from the airport.

H: Okay!

(11) S: I need to leave work early today. I'm picking up my hippo from the vet.

H: !?

Presupposed information acts as if all interlocutors are already aware of it. This can be a way of “slipping” information into the background. Sometimes this is easily done (the speaker has a sister), sometimes it makes no sense (!) – and sometimes it can be manipulative (example 7).

Speech acts: doing by saying

In addition to meaning by saying, we can also *do*. Austin (1956) observes that there is a class of things we can say that do something like report our intentions – but, in so doing, constitute the performance of the intention:

(12) I promise to come to your party! [a promise]

(13) I apologize for stepping on your foot. [an apology]

(14) I (hereby) eat this steak! [not a steak-eating]

(15) John promises to come to your party. [not a promise]

Felicity conditions

In order to be a speech act, a number of conditions of utterance must be met:

- ▶ the speaker needs to have the power to perform the act (legally or otherwise)
- ▶ the external conditions need to be appropriate
- ▶ it must be an act for which there is an associated convention of doing by saying

Here are some possible speech acts:

- ▶ *a bequest, a christening, a marriage, a request, an accusation, a recommendation*

What other acts can you think of? What are their felicity conditions? How can they “go wrong”?

Food for thought: Does the speaker **really** need to have the requisite intentions? (if I promise without intention, have I still promised?)