

# Pragmatic Aspects of Meaning II: Speech Acts, Conversational Implicature

Ling324

Reading: *Meaning and Grammar*, pg. 220-255

# Speech Acts

- What kinds of things do speakers do by uttering sentences? Speakers perform SPEECH ACTS.
- Austin (1962) says that when a speaker utters a sentence, s/he may perform three types of acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act.
- Locutionary act: an act of uttering a sentence with a certain sense and reference, which is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense.

(1) The final exam will be difficult.

The locutionary act performed in uttering a declarative sentence can be thought of as the act of stating, placing the proposition in question in the common ground of some discourse.

## Speech Acts (cont.)

- Illocutionary act: an act of performing some action in saying something.

By uttering (1), the speaker may be performing the act of informing, claiming, guessing, reminding, warning, threatening, or requesting.

We also say that utterances are associated with illocutionary forces.

In some cases, speakers can make what illocutionary act they intend to perform explicit.

- (2)
- a. The final exam will be difficult. That is a threat.
  - b. The final exam will be difficult. I guess.
  - c. The final exam will be difficult. I am warning you.
  - d. The final exam will be difficult. Let me remind you.

- Perlocutionary act: what speakers bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring.

By uttering (1), I may have achieved in convincing you to study harder for the final exam.

# Our General Approach to Illocutionary Forces

- How can a declarative with a sentential force of stating be associated with all these different illocutionary forces?

Do we want to say that declaratives are semantically ambiguous because it can perform all these different types of illocutionary acts?

- We will pursue the approach that the meaning of the sentential force associated with a declarative sentence is not semantically ambiguous. We will keep the approach that its meaning is a function that changes the common ground.

We want to characterize the meaning of a declarative sufficiently abstract enough so that it can accommodate a wide range of illocutionary actions.

The illocutionary force associated with a sentence do not belong to the realm of semantics proper.

The principles of pragmatics accounts for the possible illocutionary forces associated with utterances.

# Performative Utterances

- A performative utterance does not simply convey a message, but performs some action or initiates a state that the content of the declarative describes.

That is, the primary meaning of a performative utterance seems to be coming from the illocutionary force associated with it.

- (3)
- a. We find the defendant guilty as charged.
  - b. I bid three clubs.
  - c. I promise to split any lottery winnings with you.
  - d. You're fired.
  - e. You may have dessert tonight.
  - f. Gentlemen are requested to wear jackets and ties to dinner.

- Performative utterances do not make statements, unlike ordinary declaratives. Rather, by uttering (3b), the speaker is making a bid and by uttering (3c), the speaker is making a promise.

## Performative Utterances (cont.)

- It doesn't make sense to say that performative utterances are true or false.

What is special about them is that the utterance itself is what makes the circumstances fit the words. That is, the utterance of sentence S brings into existence the very facts that S describes.

- While performative utterances cannot be said to be true or false, they can be said to be felicitous or infelicitous.

Austin notes that certain conventions called felicity conditions regulate the use of performative utterances.

If felicity conditions governing the use of a certain form fail to be satisfied, then the use of the form may **misfire**.

For instance, one of the felicity conditions for uttering *We find the defendant guilty as charged* is that the speaker has the authority to issue a verdict.

## Performative Utterances (cont.)

- Does this all mean that performative utterances are semantically distinct from ordinary declaratives that make statements?

Does this mean that the meaning of performative utterances cannot be handled by truth-conditional semantics and that they do not update the common ground, contrary to other declaratives?

- Performative utterances are self-verifying. By virtue of stating a performative utterance, a situation is created, and thus a true statement is made.
- We can take the performative utterance to expand the common ground like any other declaratives.

For instance, as soon as (3b) is uttered, the proposition that the utterer bid three clubs is entered into the common ground. Subsequent utterances or actions of the players will be such that they are consistent with this proposition.

- Performative utterances are associated with various illocutionary forces, such as *promising*, *firing*, *bidding*, *warning*, etc.

# Performative Hypothesis

- Performative hypothesis: all sentences are performative utterances at some abstract level.

(4) *I* 'performative verb' *you that S*

The verbs that specify the illocutionary acts being performed is called PERFORMATIVE VERBS: e.g., promise, warn, threat, declare, ask, order, request, predict, etc.

- (5)
- a. I'll send you an email next week.  
I promise to you that I'll send you an email next week.
  - b. The final exam will be difficult.  
I warn you that the final exam will be difficult.
  - c. Send me an email next week.  
I request to you that you send me an email next week.

## Performative Hypothesis (cont.)

- Performative hypothesis implies that all sentences have truth values, including imperatives and interrogatives. All sentences are predicted to be true by virtue of simply uttering them.

- (6) a. Was the exam hard?  
I ask you if the exam was hard.
- b. Go home!  
I order you to go home.

- Performative hypothesis implies that a simple declarative and the performative version have the same meaning, hence the same truth values.

But while (7a) can be false, (7b) is always true by virtue of uttering it.

- (7) a. Grass is purple.
- b. I say to you that grass is purple.

- Performative hypothesis tries to incorporate illocutionary force associated with sentences into the realm of semantics. But this is not tenable, as clearly a simple declarative and its corresponding performative version do not have the same truth conditions.

We'd better leave illocutionary forces in the domain of pragmatics.

## **More on why we don't want illocutionary force to be part of literal linguistic meaning**

- A sentence can be associated with several different illocutionary forces, depending on the discourse context.

If illocutionary forces were a matter of linguistic meaning, then we would have to say that sentences are in general ambiguous.

But then what would be the source of this ambiguity?

The fact that an utterance can express different illocutionary forces is a matter of assumptions and attitudes of the speaker toward the propositional content expressed by the utterance.

## More on why we don't want illocutionary force to be part of literal linguistic meaning (cont.)

- A single utterance can express two different illocutionary forces at the same time.

(8) I will send you an email next week.

By uttering (8), the speaker can report a decision, and at the same time make a promise.

Generally, for a single utterance of an ambiguous expression, speakers convey only one of the linguistically assigned meanings.

- (9) a. John is sitting by the bank.  
b. John saw a man with a binoculars.

## More on why we don't want illocutionary force to be part of literal linguistic meaning (cont.)

- There are many different ways to accomplish an illocutionary aim.

The sentences in (10) can all be used to make a request to the hearer to bring some water.

- (10)
- a. Bring me a glass of water.
  - b. I would like to drink some water.
  - c. Can I have some water?
  - d. I am really thirsty.

We don't want to say that they are synonymous just because they have the same illocutionary force.

- How can speakers use sentences to express various types of illocutionary forces other than the canonical sentential force they are associated with?

How can speakers so successfully use language to convey more than what the overtly expressed words say?

# Implicature

- An utterance of sentence  $S$  has  $p$  as its implicature just in case in uttering  $S$ , the speaker invites the hearer to infer that the speaker is making a commitment to  $p$ .
- Conventional implicature: Implications on the basis of the conventional meanings of the words occurring in a sentence.

- (11) a. John is English, **but** he is cowardly.  
b. John is English, and he is cowardly.  
c. John's being cowardly is somehow surprising in light of his being English.

Truth-conditionally, (11a-11b) have the same meaning. But only (11a) implies something along the lines of (11c).

- Conversational implicature: Implications derived on the basis of conversational principles and assumptions, relying on more than the linguistic meaning of words in a sentence.

We will mainly focus on conversational implicatures in this section.

## Conversational principles (Grice 1975)

- Grice proposed that conversation is regulated by a PRINCIPLE OF COOPERATION between speaker and hearer to achieve the purposes at stake in their conversation:
  - (12) Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk in which you are engaged.
- To implement this principle, rational speakers choose what to say in light of the following MAXIMS:
  - (13)
    - a. Relation: Be relevant.
    - b. Quantity: Be only as informative as required for current conversational purposes.
    - c. Quality: Say only what you believe to be true and adequately supported.
    - d. Manner: Be perspicuous. That is, be brief and orderly and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

## Conversational principles (Grice 1975) (cont.)

- Grice is saying that language users assume that the speakers are following these maxims to articulate a conversational strategy for cooperatively conveying information.

Thus, hearers will assume that speakers are following these maxims, and will interpret what speakers say, under this assumption.

This will allow hearers to infer things beyond what is actually said, deriving a certain conversational implicature.

# Characteristics of Conversational Implicature

- Implicatures are calculable from:
    - (i) the linguistic meaning of what is said;
    - (ii) the assumption that the speaker is observing the conversational maxims;
    - (iii) contextual assumptions of various kinds.
- (14) a. John has a car.  
b. John has only one car.  
c. John has one or more cars.

(14a) entails (14c), but conversationally implicates (14b).

The hearer will assume that the speaker of (14a) is following the conversational maxims. In particular, the maxim of quantity says that the speaker should be informative enough. So, the hearer will deduce that if the speaker knew that John had more than one car, he would have said so. Also, according to the maxim of quality, the hearer will assume that the speaker knows what he is talking about. So, the hearer will deduce that the speaker has the correct information as to how many cars John has. Through this kind of calculation, the hearer will infer (14b).

## Characteristics of Conversational Implicature (cont.)

- Implicatures are defeasible/cancelable.

Sometimes, the context (or the speaker himself) may provide a new information that effects the calculation of a conversational implicature, canceling it.

(15) a. John has a car.

b. John has a car. Perhaps, even two.

(16) a. Mary got married and got pregnant.

b. Mary got married and got pregnant, but not in that order.

## Characteristics of Conversational Implicature (cont.)

- Implicatures are nondetachable.

Expressions with the same linguistic meaning should generate the same implicatures relative to a fixed context.

- (17) a. Can you lend me \$15 for a few days?  
b. Are you able to lend me \$15 for a few days?  
c. Please lend me \$15 for a few days.

However, there are examples that seem to contradict the nondetachability of implicatures.

- (18) a. Can you pass the salt?  
b. Are you able to pass the salt?  
c. Please pass the salt.
- (19) a. It is **possible** that a woman will be president some day.  
b. It is **not impossible** that a woman will be president some day.

These examples show that although different linguistic forms can express the same literal content, they don't always result in the same implicatures. The exact form in which that content is expressed is often a significant factor in deriving a certain implicature.

# Scalar Implicature

- Certain group of words are related with each other with respect to a scale.

- (20) a. every > some  
b. excellent > good > ok

The meaning expressed by the weaker member of the scale is consistent with the meaning expressed by the stronger member.

However, if a speaker utters a sentence using the weaker member of the scale, the implication is that the stronger member of the scale does not hold.

- (21) a. Some students did very well on the exam.  
b. Not every student did very well on the exam.  
Some students did not do very well on the exam.

- (22) a. This paper is good.  
b. This paper is not excellent.

## Scalar Implicature (cont.)

- Calculation

The calculation of the scalar implicature relies on maxims of quantity and quality.

The stronger proposition that *Every student did well on the exam* is more informative than the proposition expressed by (21a). The speaker knows well how all the students did. So, if the speaker had believed that all the students did well, she must have said so. But since the speaker did not utter the stronger proposition, s/he must not believe it. And by using the weaker form *some*, the speaker intends to convey this information.

- Cancelability

(23) Some of the students did very well on the exam. Perhaps all.

(24) This paper will certainly be good. And it may well be excellent.

## Is *either...or* ambiguous between exclusive and inclusive meaning? (Pragmatic Argument)

- (25) a. At the restaurant, John ordered either steak or fish for lunch.  
b. John didn't order both steak and fish.

- With the help of Gricean maxims, we can argue that semantically *either...or* is unambiguously inclusive, and that sometimes, it gives rise to exclusive interpretation as an implicature.

- Calculation

In general, in restaurants, a customer orders one dish per meal. And appealing to maxim of quantity, if John had ordered both steak and fish, the speaker would have said so, using an expression more informative than *or*, perhaps *and*. But since s/he did not use *and*, s/he must be in no position to do so. Hence, the implicature that John ordered only one dish arises.

## Is *either...or* ambiguous between exclusive and inclusive meaning? (Semantic Argument)

- Ambiguities in a sentence are matched by ambiguities in negation of that sentence.

(26) a. John was sitting by the bank.  
b. John was not sitting by the bank.

(27) a. John saw a man with a pair of binoculars.  
b. John did not see a man with a pair of binoculars.

If *either...or* is ambiguous, then negation of *either...or* should also be ambiguous.

Under the inclusive meaning: a sentence with negation of *either...or* is true iff both of the disjuncts are false.

Under the exclusive meaning: a sentence with negation of *either...or* is true if (i) both of the disjuncts are false; or (ii) both of the disjuncts are true.

## Is *either...or* ambiguous between exclusive and inclusive meaning? (Semantic Argument) (cont.)

- Metalinguistic negation

Some negative sentences appear to be supporting evidence for positing that *either...or* also has exclusive meaning semantically.

- (28) a. John didn't order either steak or fish for lunch.  
b. John didn't order EITHER steak or fish for lunch. He ordered both.

But negation in (28b) is not a regular negation that negates the proposition. It is a METALINGUISTIC NEGATION that attacks the word *either* and implies that the use of *either* is incorrect.

More examples of metalinguistic negation:

- (29) a. That novel isn't GOOD; it's absolutely superb.  
b. She didn't get SOME of the questions right; she answered every single one correctly.  
c. John doesn't LIKE that woman; he loves her.

## Is *either...or* ambiguous between exclusive and inclusive meaning? (Semantic Argument) (cont.)

- *It is not the case that ...*

- (30) a. It is not the case that John ordered either steak or fish.  
b. # It is not the case that John ordered either steak or fish. He ordered both steak and fish.

- *neither...nor*

A negative version of *either...or* is *neither...nor*. If *either...or* is ambiguous, then we should expect *neither...nor* to be ambiguous as well.

But, *neither...nor* is only interpretable as negating the inclusive meaning of *either...or*.

- (31) a. John ordered neither steak nor fish.  
b. # John ordered neither steak nor fish. He ordered both steak and fish.

# Conversational Implicatures Arising from FLOUTING of Maxims

- Sometimes, maxims are apparently flouted by the speaker, and yet the hearer still assumes that the cooperative principle is in play, and tries to infer what the speaker intends to convey on this basis.
- Flouting the maxim of quantity and maxim of relevance

(32) In a letter of recommendation for a student applying for a graduate school

- a. John has a nice smile and has great handwriting.
- b. John is not a smart student.

The letter writer is intentionally being not very informative and providing irrelevant information as to the quality of John as a potential graduate school candidate. The letter writer must know this, and therefore s/he must be trying to indicate that there is nothing good to say about John.

## Conversational Implicatures Arising from FLOUTING of Maxims (cont.)

- Flouting the maxim of relevance

(33) a. A: I do think Mrs. Jenkins is an old windbag, don't you?  
b. B: Huh, lovely weather for March, isn't it?

- Flouting the maxim of quality

(34) a. Queen Victoria was made of iron.  
b. Queen Victoria was hard, resilient, and non-flexible.

- Flouting the maxim of manner

(35) a. Miss Singer produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of an aria.  
b. Miss Singer sang an aria (and wasn't very good).

QUESTION: People lie and succeed all the time, violating the maxim of quality. Does this mean that the maxim of quality is incorrect? How can we reconcile the maxim of quality and the fact that people lie?