



Pragmatics

Reading: FRH Ch. 4

PLIN0006: Introduction to Language



Pragmatics

- In Semantics, we looked at how speakers are able to compute the meaning of sentences based on truth-conditions.
- But what about sentences that have a context-dependent interpretation that is different from their semantics?
- Example: ‘It’s a bit chilly in here, isn’t it?’
(A request to close the window/turn on the radiator)
- **Pragmatics** studies how context contributes to meaning.

Example

1. Jay: 'Guys, we should have an all-night party on Monday!'

Will: 'I have my last exam on Tuesday.'

2. Jay: 'Guys, we should have an all-night party on Tuesday!'

Will: 'I have my last exam on Tuesday.'

- In both situations, Will uses the same sentence to give a different response.
- Sentences can convey a different meaning dependent on context.

Implicatures

- **Implicatures** are inferences that a listener may draw from an utterance based on context.
- Lois Lane: ‘Could Clark Kent be Superman?’
Lex Luthor: ‘He did disappear earlier when things got heated...’
‘A superhero wouldn’t run away like that.’
- Implicatures can be **cancelled**.

The Cooperative Principle

- For implicatures to work, speaker and listener must be able to delineate the space of admissible contextual information. Not too much, not too little.
- When we act on assumptions about appropriate interpretations in a given context, we **cooperate** to facilitate information exchange.
- Paul Grice: “Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Maxim of Quantity

- **Maxim of Quantity:**

Give as much information as is necessary, but no more.

- **Example:**

A: When is the football match?

B: a) Later..

b) Saturday at 3pm.

c) In 72 hours, 12 minutes, and 3 seconds from now the Spurs will play Brighton in their home stadium in Tottenham, North London.

Maxim of Relevance

- **Maxim of Relevance:**

Be relevant at the time of the utterance.

- **Example:**

A: When is the football match?

B: The Spurs are likely to win. Of their last ten matches against Brighton, they have only lost two, and had one draw.

Maxim of Manner

- **Maxim of Manner:**

Avoid ambiguity and obscurity; be orderly.

- **Example:**

A: When is the football match?

B: The match will start when the referee blows the whistle.

Maxim of Quality

- **Maxim of Quality:**

Assert truthful and well-supported information.

- **Example:**

A: When is the football match?

B: It's been called off.

To maxim or not to maxim...

- We all use, and flout, these maxims, all the time.
- We generally assume that others follow the cooperative principle.
- Sometimes, people are forced to promise cooperation,
e.g. when giving sworn testimony in court:

Tell the truth (quality),

the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (quantity).

Presupposition

- **Presuppositions** are the implicit background assumptions that we make based on the assumption that some utterance is true.
- ‘Have you stopped beating your wife yet?’
Presupposition: You were beating your wife.
- ‘Rose and The Doctor travel through time together.’
Presupposition: Time travel is possible.

Word choice and presupposition

- Certain words give rise to presuppositions, while others do not.
- **Examples:**
- The administration **forgot** that the staff support the students.
- The administration **believes** that the staff support the students.
- Have you **stopped** to exercise regularly?
- Have you **tried** to exercise regularly?

Summary

- In addition to knowledge of word and sentence meaning, speakers have knowledge of implicit and contextual meaning.
- Determining meaning in context depends on the cooperative principle.
- Contextual meaning is based on implicatures, which can be cancelled.
- We can draw inferences not only from the truth-conditions of a sentence, but also from the assumption that a sentence is true (i.e. presuppositions).