



Formal semantics and pragmatics, and their origins in philosophy

Implicature and speech acts

NASSLLI

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0. Finding out what was meant

The aim of **interpretation** is to figure out what the speaker meant by her utterance. (In the course of conversation, the hearer often learns things the speaker unwittingly reveals. But it's not clear this should be called interpretation. In any case, we will set these cases aside.)

What a speaker means is invariably some response from the hearer. To find out what the response is supposed to be, the hearer must know what the utterance was – a greeting, a warning, an apology, a request, a statement, etc. The hearer must determine what **speech act** the speaker performed.

Most (perhaps all) speech acts have contents; this too must be determined. Knowledge of linguistic meaning will go some of the way but most of the content conveyed is implicit. Determining the implicit part of content is what we call **augmentation** or **displacement** (depending on whether the explicit content was meant).

0. Finding out what was meant

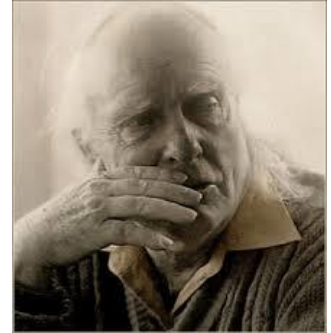
A long time ago there were a king and queen who said every day, “Ah, if only we had a child,” but they never had one.

- The king and queen were married to each other.
- The king and queen had a kingdom.
- The king and queen had no children.
- The king and queen often said “Ah, if only we had a child.”
- The king and queen wanted to have a child.

Most of these inferences are automatic and hard to account for. The penultimate is a case of **figurative speech** (hyperbole); the last one is a case of **implicature** (conversational).

1. Implicature

1. Saying and implying



A: How is C doing?

B: Quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

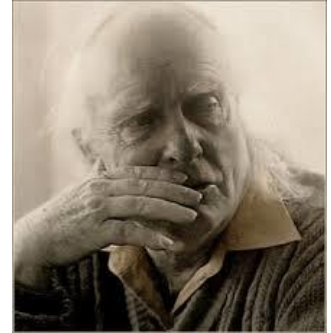
What B **said** is, roughly, that C is doing well, he likes his colleagues, and he has not been imprisoned.

What B **conventionally implicated** is roughly, that he is not entirely certain that C is doing well.

What B **con conversationally implicates** is roughly, that C and his colleagues are committing a crime.

1. Implicature

2. Cooperation



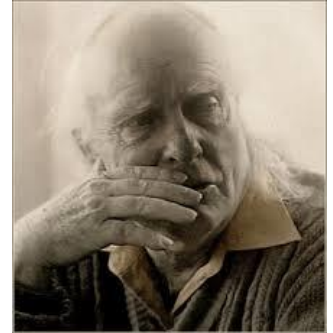
Cooperative Principle:

Make your conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

If the purpose is **maximally efficient exchange of information** then it follows that, other things being equal, we should adhere to certain rules – e.g. we should not lie, bullshit, go off topic, obfuscate, etc.

1. Implicature

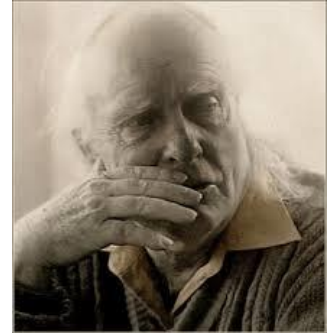
3. The maxims



- Maxims of Quantity:**
1. Make your contribution as informative as required.
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative.
- Maxims of Quality:**
1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Maxim of Relation:**
1. Be relevant.
- Maxims of Manner:**
1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief.
 4. Be orderly.

1. Implicature

4. Failing to comply



There are many ways a speaker can fail to comply with a maxim:

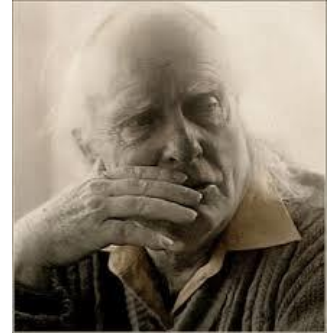
- she may **quietly violate** it (and thereby most likely mislead),
- she may **opt out** of it (and thereby most likely stall the conversation),
- she may be faced with a **clash** (and be forced to violate a maxims)
- she may **openly flout** a maxim.

Some students failed.

If all students failed, the speaker would be violating the first Maxim of Quantity in saying this. Therefore (assuming the speaker is cooperative, and knows whether all students failed), she knows that not all students failed, and (since she expects that the hearer can reproduce this rationale) can be taken to intend to communicate this.

1. Implicature

5. Tests



Cancelability. You can explicitly or implicitly indicate that you opt out of the Cooperative Principle, and thereby cancel the implication.

Non-detachability. You cannot get rid of the implication merely by rephrasing the sentence uttered.

Calculability. You can go through an explicit reasoning based on what is said, some background information, the assumption that the speaker is cooperative, and the maxims, to derive the implication.

2. Figurative speech

1. Examples

Allusion: Saying *He made me an offer I couldn't refuse* meaning that he used an implicit threat to persuade me.

Synecdoche: Saying *Brussels insists on the measure* meaning that officials in Brussels on behalf of the European Union insist on the measure.

Hyperbole: Saying *That train goes faster than the speed of light* meaning that the train is considerably faster than normal trains.

Meiosis: Saying *I've had a bad day* when I lost both legs in an accident.

Irony: Saying *This was the perfect ending* after a dismally unentertaining show is interrupted by a fire alarm.

2. Figurative speech

2. Metaphor

Metaphor pulls together meanings from distinct domains. They are often (but not always!) semantically anomalous:

Juliet is the Sun.

No man is an island.

The interpreter must discover a connection (sometimes called **analogy**) between the object (sometimes called **tenor**) and the attributed feature (sometimes called **vehicle**).

2. Figurative speech

3. Truth in fiction

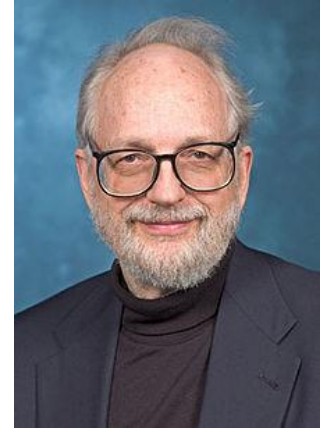
- (1) Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street 221b.
- (2) Crotone is on the arch of the Italian boot.

Both (1) and (2) are false but true in a fiction. The Sherlock Holmes fiction and the Italian boot fiction are **games of make-believe**, where the addressees are invited to imagine various things. What is true in a fiction is what participants in the game can expect to imagine, according to the rules of the game.

Fictional truths are permeated with regularities we project from our own real world. That's why it is true in the Sherlock Holmes fiction that Holmes lives near Melcombe Street (something that is never mentioned in the novels) and why it is true in the Italian boot fiction (2) that Reggio Calabria (a town a speaker may never have heard of) is on the toe of the Italian boot.

2. Figurative speech

4. Orientation of fiction



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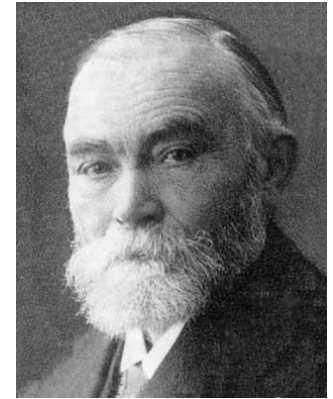
Both of these fictions employ real world objects to help us generate fictional truths—Baker Street and Italy. These entities function somewhat like props on the stage aiding imagination.

(1) exploits the audience's knowledge of the prop to flesh out a content ("this is where one might expect to find bachelor lodgings of the sort Holmes and Watson occupy"); (2) exploits a content to inform about the prop ("this is the part of Italy where Crotone is to be found").

Metaphor can be thought of as **prop-oriented make-belief**.

3. Speech acts

1. Judging and asserting



$\vdash 5+7 = 12$

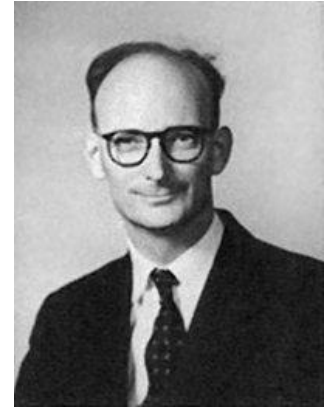
Judging that $5+7=12$ involves first **apprehending** the thought that $5+7=12$, and second **affirming** the truth of this thought. These two mental acts correspond to the two parts of the Fregean symbol \vdash : the horizontal – represents the first, the vertical | the second. **Assertion** is the outer manifestation of affirmation.

$? 5+7 = 12.$

When we ask a yes/no question, it involves the same apprehension, but instead of affirmation a different mental act, we can call **query**. **Inquiring** as the outer manifestation of query.

3. Speech acts

2. Locution, illocution, perlocution



The **locutionary act** is a public presentation of a content by means of a linguistic expression; the **perlocutionary act** requires that the audience should react to the presentation of the content in a specific way.

Assertion is something in between. It's success may require uptake but nothing beyond on the part of the audience.

Illocutionary acts are often expressed by verbs taking just a subject and a complement clause, while the verbs standing for perlocutionary acts often take an extra argument for the addressee. But there are plenty of exceptions—**tell**, **warn**, **advise**, and **thank** all express illocutionary acts.

3. Speech acts

3. Performatives and constatives

(1) I order the halibut.

Case 1: Hannah is in a restaurant and utters (1) addressing the waiter.

Case 2: Hannah is narrating a video of herself and utters (1).

In Case 1, Hannah orders the halibut; in Case 2, she describes her ordering of the halibut. The first speech act is a **performative**, the second a **constative**.

Sentences normally used in performative utterances also have constative uses, except when they contain a special adverb or prepositional phrase, such as **hereby**, **herewith**, or **with these words**.

3. Speech acts

4. Direction of fit



Consider a shopper in a store who is buying the items on his list. He is being followed by a detective who writes the items the shopper puts in his cart on a list.

The two lists might be indistinguishable in appearance but they guide the behavior of their users in different ways. If there is a mismatch between the contents of the list and the content of the shopping cart, the shopper is supposed to change the latter, the detective is supposed to change the former.

The shopper's list has a **world-to word** direction of fit, the detective's list has a **word-to-world** direction of fit.

3. Speech acts

5. Four kinds of illocutionary acts

- i. **Word-to-world direction of fit:** success of speech act requires that the content of the utterance match a preexisting fact (e.g. *This ship is named The Donald.*)
- ii. **World-to-word direction of fit:** success of speech act requires that a fact be brought about to match the content of the utterance (e.g. *Name this ship The Donald!*)
- iii. **Double direction of fit:** success of speech act requires that a fact be brought about to match the content of the utterance by virtue of the fact that the content is taken to match a fact (e.g. *I hereby name the ship The Donald.*)
- iv. **Empty direction of fit:** success of speech act requires no fit between the content of the utterance and a fact (e.g. *Hail to The Donald.*).

Constatives belong to i; performatives to iii.

4. Assertion

1. What is special about assertion?

Not all constative speech acts are assertions. Instead of asserting that something is the case one might, for example, suppose, conjecture, or imply that it is.

A **supposition** lacks the “all things considered” character of assertion—it is made for the sake of some limited purpose.

A **conjecture** lacks the evidential basis of assertion—it is made on less than conclusive grounds.

An **implication** lacks the explicitness of assertion—it relies on the addressee’s reasoning.

4. Assertion

2. Transmitting knowledge

While it seems clear that knowledge can be transmitted through assertion, how this happens is puzzling.

For the hearer to know that p she must have some reason for her belief. She may not be able to articulate her reason, but if she is she might say something like this: “Given that the speaker asserted that p he presumably knows that p , and that is good enough for me.” But why is the hearer entitled to think that the speaker knows that p , given that he asserted that p ?



4. Assertion

3. Moore's Paradox

(1) It's raining but I don't know it.

Assertion contrasts with supposition and conjecture in this regard:

(2) Suppose it's raining but I don't know it.

(3) – What's your best guess about the weather in Dublin?

– Oh, it's raining. But, of course, I don't know this.

If we understand the source of the peculiar sort of infelicity associated with (1) we may gain insight into why assertion enables us to transfer knowledge.

4. Assertion

4. What explains Moore's Paradox?



Moore thinks that in asserting that it is raining the speaker implies that he knows it is raining.

But ... the implication is neither conventional nor conversational.

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Williamson thinks that in asserting that it is raining the speaker is subject to a norm to know that it is raining.

But ... if there is such a norm it is puzzling why it is routinely violated.

4. Assertion

5. Pragmatic expressivism

- (1) Stealing is widespread.
- (2) Stealing is wrong.



Ayer says two things about (2)—that it lacks factual meaning (and hence, truth-conditions) and that sincerely uttering it is like sincerely uttering **Stealing money!!** with a particular intonation (and hence, expressing moral disapproval). The second can obviously stand on its own.

Pragmatic expressivists say that expression of disapproval is all the speaker is doing in sincerely uttering (2). In particular, she does not express the belief that stealing is wrong in addition to a disapproval of stealing. But then why is (3) clearly anomalous and why is (4) not clearly anomalous?

- (3) Stealing is wrong but I don't know that it is.
- (4) Stealing is wrong but I don't disapprove of it.

the end