

# WHAT IS PRAGMATICS?

1

We explore the different meanings of *meaning* and the kinds of issues which are dealt with by semantics and pragmatics.

What do these children still need to learn about using language?

A little boy comes in the front door.

Mother: Wipe your feet, please.

He removes his muddy shoes and socks and carefully wipes his clean feet on the doormat.

A father is trying to get his 3-year-old daughter to stop lifting up her dress to display her new underwear to the assembled guests.

Father: We don't DO that.

Daughter: I KNOW, Daddy. You don't WEAR dresses.

The children's knowledge of vocabulary and grammar does not appear to be the problem. When the little boy's mother asked him to wipe his feet, that is exactly what he did. The little girl explained why her father was not participating in the underwear show with perfect grammar and quite impeccable logic. The problem is that the children appear to have understood what the words meant but not what their parents meant. As adults, we usually arrive at the speaker's meaning so effortlessly that we tend to be unaware of the considerable amount of skill and knowledge that we used to accomplish this.

Semantics and pragmatics are the two main areas of linguistic study that look at the knowledge we use both to extract meaning when we hear or read, and to convey meaning when we speak or write. Within linguistics itself, the dividing line between these two

## 2 WHAT IS PRAGMATICS?

Semantics  
Pragmatics

disciplines is still under considerable debate. However, generally speaking, SEMANTICS concentrates on meaning that comes from purely linguistic knowledge, while PRAGMATICS concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account knowledge about the physical and social world. As you work through the exercises in this unit, you should be able to fill out these preliminary definitions a bit more and get a feel for what pragmatic analysis involves.

If you were counting, you will have noticed that the words *mean* and *meaning* have appeared 11 times so far and with several different meanings (12!). We will start our study of pragmatics by exploring the meaning (13!) of *meaning* (14!).

### EXERCISE

**1.1** First write down your own definition of *meaning* and underline what you felt were the key words in your definition. Then look up the definition given for *meaning* in a good dictionary.

### Comment

Did you get very far? Was the dictionary any help when it provided you with *purpose*, *significance*, *signification*, *intention* and *sense*? Let's try to break the task down into more manageable chunks. We will start with an important kind of knowledge for successfully interpreting language – word meaning.

### EXERCISE

**1.2** (a) What does *cat* mean? (b) What does *cream* mean? (c) What does *drink* mean?

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Lexi

Chpt 1  
1) Semantics vs. pragmatics  
2) meaning + what is our object of study?  
3) sentence vs. utterance.  
3) Understanding words vs. understanding meaning

fairly easy. My answers were: (a) *cat* a liquid fat of milk; (c) *drink* to consume  
for individual words, you were analysing  
the focus of LEXICAL SEMANTICS. Did  
resort to the meanings of other words  
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**Semantics**  
**Pragmatics**

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**EXERCISE** ✎

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**1.2** (a) What does *cat* mean? (b) What does *cream* mean? (c) What does *drink* mean?

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**Comment**

You probably found this fairly easy. My answers were: (a) *cat* a domestic feline; (b) *cream* the liquid fat of milk; (c) *drink* to consume liquid.

**Lexical semantics**

By providing definitions for individual words, you were analysing the kind of meaning that is the focus of LEXICAL SEMANTICS. Did you notice how you had to resort to the meanings of other words in the language in order to construct your definitions? Of course, providing word meanings is not always an easy task, nor is teaching them for that matter. An American high school teacher asked her students what *dogmatic* meant and received the following answer: *A machine powered by dogs.*

 EXERCISE

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**1.3** What does *Cats drink cream* mean?

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This was a bit more complicated, but still pretty manageable. When asked what a sentence means, people usually provide another sentence that has virtually the same meaning, a PARAPHRASE. There are a variety of ways that you could paraphrase *Cats drink cream*. You could change (a) individual words (b) the sentence structure, or (c) both the individual words and the sentence structure. Here are some possible paraphrases for our sentence:

*Domestic felines consume the liquid fat of milk.*

*Cream is drunk by cats.*

*The liquid fat of milk is drunk by domestic felines.*

In this exercise you were carrying out the kind of analysis that is the FOCUS OF SENTENCE SEMANTICS. To provide a paraphrase you used your knowledge of the meanings of the individual words but you also used your knowledge of English grammar. For example, word order is very important for establishing sentence meaning in English. The sentences *Cats chase mice* and *Mice chase cats* contain the same words but have entirely different meanings.

**Comment****Paraphrase****Sentence semantics** EXERCISE

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**1.4** Mike, Annie and Mike's cat, Felix, are in Mike's kitchen. What did Annie mean?

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Mike: What happened to that bowl of cream?

Annie: Cats drink cream.

Now things have become considerably more complicated. We are no longer talking simply about what words or sentences mean, but what a person means as well. We have entered the realm of pragmatics and yet another meaning of *meaning*. It seems to me that in addition to saying that cream is drunk by cats, Annie is also accusing Felix of the crime. I would imagine that you came up with a similar answer. We can make these layers of meaning explicit by providing separate paraphrases for the semantic meaning (a semantic paraphrase or SP) and the pragmatic meaning (a pragmatic paraphrase or PP):

**Cats drink cream**

SP: Domestic felines consume the liquid fat of milk.

PP: Felix probably drank the cream.

**Comment**

**Sentence  
Utterance**

Did you notice that when we are talking about what a particular speaker means, our paraphrases can be rather different from the literal meaning of the sentence that was uttered?

Linguists often make the distinction between a SENTENCE and an UTTERANCE. This distinction can be useful for two reasons. First, pragmatics analyses language in use and many of the utterances we use do not consist of full sentences yet are entirely understandable in context:

Jane: Coffee?  
Steve: Sure!  
Jane: White?  
Steve: Black.

Second, while we can talk about the two sentences *Cats drink cream* and *Cats drink cream* as being exactly the same, we cannot really say this about utterances because each utterance is a unique event created at a particular point in time for a particular purpose. The next two exercises will illustrate this.

**EXERCISE** 


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**1.5** Provide a semantic meaning (SP) and a pragmatic meaning (PP) for *It's cold in here* in two different contexts, (a) and (b) below:

- (a) Mike and Annie are in the living room. Mike asks Annie whether she'd like to eat dinner in the living room or the kitchen. Annie replies: *It's cold in here.*
  - (b) The Queen and her butler, James, are in the drawing room. The window is open. The Queen says: *It's cold in here.*
- 

**Comment**

Here are sample analyses.

- (a) *It's cold in here*  
SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.  
PP: Let's eat in the kitchen
- (b) *It's cold in here*  
SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.  
PP: James, shut the window.

**EXERCISE** 


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**1.6** Now provide a third context for *It's cold in here* which would yield a third and different pragmatic meaning.

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**Comment**

Here is one possibility:

Mike and Annie are in the greenhouse. Mike wonders why his orchids haven't bloomed. Annie replies: It's cold in here.

**It's cold in here**

SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.

PP: The orchids aren't blooming because the greenhouse is too cold.

As you can see, two or more utterances might have the same underlying sentence as their 'script', but they can have quite different interpretations in context. By now you will have noticed that interpreting what a speaker's utterance means involves a fair amount of intelligent guesswork for the hearer, and considerably more knowledge than comes from simply knowing the meanings of individual words and how they combine to form sentences. In the following units, we will be looking in more detail at what this sort of intelligent guesswork might involve.

- Language meaning can be analysed at several levels.
- Semantics concentrates on the meaning that comes from linguistic knowledge, while pragmatics concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account our knowledge about the physical and social world.
- The focus of pragmatic analysis is on the meaning of speakers' utterances rather than on the meaning of words or sentences.
- Utterances need not consist of complete sentences. Each utterance is a unique physical event created at a particular point in time for a particular communicative purpose.

**SUMMARY****FURTHER EXERCISES**

**1.7** Below are several conversational extracts where the participants are discussing meaning. For each extract decide if the meaning type under discussion would be primarily the concern of semantics or pragmatics.

- (a) Mike: That's an interesting hat.  
Annie: What do you mean by that?
- (b) Steve: Listen to this. 'No animal bird or reptile shall be kept in the Flat or any other part of the building without the prior written consent of the Lessor which (if given) shall be deemed to be by way of licence revocable at will.'
- Jane: That just means tenants can't have pets without the landlord's written permission and that even if he does give permission, he can take it back any time he wants to.

- (c) Parent: Where are your shoes, young man?  
 Child: Under my bed.  
 Parent: When I asked where your shoes were, I wanted you to put them on!
- (d) Ed: Lugubrious?  
 Faye: You know, sort of mournful, not very cheerful.
- (e) Dave: What did Macbeth mean when he said that life was a tale told by an idiot?  
 Sarah: I guess he thought that life didn't make any sense.

**1.8** Provide at least one possible semantic paraphrase (SP) for sentences (a)–(d) below.

Example: *The party is going to begin after he leaves.*

SP: The party will commence after he departs.

Analyse your paraphrases in terms of whether you changed individual words, the sentence structure, or both.

- (a) *Her mother is unhappy.*  
 (b) *My friend loathes string beans.*  
 (c) *I'll look for that book right now.*  
 (d) *Steve hugged Jane.*

### SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

**1.9** Words can have more than one semantic meaning and consequently so can the sentences in which they appear. For example, *We liked the ball* could have two different semantic meanings:

- SP1: We liked the sphere.  
 SP2: We liked the dance.

We often have to use our knowledge of the context to predict which one is intended by the speaker, and sometimes we have to 'back-track'. I saw this sign in the window of a seafood restaurant in the USA:

We serve shrimps and crabs  
 And tall people and nice people too

Provide three **different** semantic meanings (SPs) for the first line of the sign and choose the one that was intended given the second line. Which of the three was your first prediction as you were reading the sign? Can you think of any reasons why that was your first prediction? Did any of them involve your expectations about the world and the way people behave?

**1.10** Provide three different contexts in which the utterance *I'm hot* would have three different pragmatic meanings even though the underlying semantic meaning would remain the same. (Follow the format we used in **Exercise 1.6**.)

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**1.11** Here is an example of a context where three different utterances could potentially have similar pragmatic meanings, even though each of them has a different semantic meaning. A mother walks into a very messy room and addresses teenage inhabitant:

This room is a pig sty! How many times have I told you about this room? Clean this room up.

For (a)–(c) below, provide three alternatives for the underlined utterance. Each alternative should potentially have a similar pragmatic meaning, even though the semantic meaning would be different.

- (a) Matt: Do you want some cake?  
Chris: I'm on a diet.
- (b) Ed: How was the party?  
Faye: Don't ask!
- (c) Matt: Lend me a pen.  
Chris: Here. But it's running out of ink.
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**1.12** Below are four definitions of *pragmatics*. What elements do they have in common? Do you notice any differences in emphasis?

- (a) Pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others.  
(Crystal, 1987, p. 120)
- (b) Pragmatics can be usefully defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations.  
(Leech, 1983, p. x)
- (c) Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said.  
(Yule, 1996, p. 3)
- (d) There is a distinction between a hearer's knowledge of her language and her knowledge of the world. In this section, I shall argue that it is this distinction that underlies the distinction between semantics and pragmatics.  
(Blakemore, 1992, p. 39)
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 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**1.13** Growing up is hard to do! Analyse the semantic and/or pragmatic difficulties these young people have got themselves into. (Examples (c)–(e) are from American high school students who were asked to define a word and use it in a sentence.)

- (a) A pupil was asked to comment on the line *The child is the father to the man* and answered: This was written by Shakespeare. He often made this kind of mistake.
- (b) Child: Mommy, I want more milk.  
Parent: Is that the way to ask?  
Child: Please.  
Parent: Please what?  
Child: Please gimme milk.
- |     |                                     |  |   |
|-----|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| (c) | <i>Word</i><br><i>risqué</i>        | <i>Student's definition</i><br>'daring'        | <i>Student's sentence</i><br>The risqué little squirrel wasn't afraid of the dog.     |
| (d) | <i>Word</i><br><i>indefatigable</i> | <i>Student's definition</i><br>'tireless'      | <i>Student's sentence</i><br>The Halloween gang left several cars indefatigable.      |
| (e) | <i>Word</i><br><i>spurious</i>      | <i>Student's definition</i><br>'wearing spurs' | <i>Student's sentence</i><br>The cowboy strode spuriously through the admiring crowd. |
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### FURTHER READING

For short, beginner-level overviews of the types of questions that pragmatics deals with and the relationship between semantics and pragmatics:

Crystal, 1987, pp. 120–22.  
Yule, 1996, pp. 3–8.

For more advanced treatment of these issues:

Blakemore, 1992, pp. 39–53.  
Leech, 1983, pp. 1–18.

The examples of American high school students wrestling with vocabulary questions come from:

Greene, 1969.

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# ENTAILMENT

# 2

In the first unit we saw that interpreting utterances involves a considerable amount of intelligent guesswork where the hearer draws inferences from the speaker's words to arrive at the speaker's meaning. In this unit we look at entailment, a relationship between sentences that forms the basis for some of these inferences.

Exam Question: Draw inferences from the fact that when water freezes, a pipe bursts.

Student's Answer: I have never seen an inference so I cannot draw one.

(From *Howlers* by Russell Ash, 1985)

## EXERCISE

**2.1** Look at the following 'slips' from radio and television announcers. What's wrong here?

- (a) It's been an amazing year for Crystal Palace over the past 12 months.
- (b) The robbery was committed by a pair of identical twins, both are said to be about age 20.
- (c) Send in your competition answers with your name, age, and how old you are.
- (d) So you're a housewife and a mother. Do you have any children?

**Comment**

We normally do not expect people to tell us something we already know. Embedded in every utterance is a considerable amount of 'understood' information which comes from our knowledge of the language itself. The 'slips' in this exercise give or ask for redundant information, information which can be automatically inferred from the meanings of words the speaker has already used. If you know the meaning of *year*, *twins*, *age* and *mother*, then you also know that: a year is 12 months long; twins are the same age; your age is how old you are; a mother has a least one child.

**EXERCISE** ✎

**2.2** Pretend that you have just arrived from another planet. You have learned the vocabulary and grammar of English, but you have never visited Earth before, nor have you ever met or spoken to another Earthling. As is the custom on your planet, you interpret everything you hear literally. Your job is to decide whether each of my following statements is true or false and why.

- (a) My mother is a woman.
- (b) My mother is a doctor.
- (c) The tiger is unhappy.
- (d) The tiger is an animal.
- (e) My mother is a boy.
- (f) The tiger is a reptile.

**Comment**

Without knowing anything about my mother or the tiger in question, you can quite easily answer 'true' to (a) and (d) because of your knowledge of English. These sentences are necessarily true because of the meaning relationship between the words *mother* and *woman* and between *tiger* and *animal*. These types of sentences are sometimes referred to as ANALYTIC SENTENCES. Similarly, given that you interpret everything literally, you can easily answer 'false' to (e) and (f). The meanings of *mother* and *boy* and *tiger* and *reptile* make such sentences necessarily false, or CONTRADICTIONS. However, (b) and (c) present you with a problem. They may or may not be true. You cannot verify the truth or falsity of those statements by looking in your dictionary. You would need other, non-linguistic, information about my mother and the particular tiger I am referring to. These are sometimes referred to as SYNTHETIC SENTENCES. If it turns out that my mother actually is a doctor or that the tiger is unhappy, we would say that these statements are SYNTHETICALLY TRUE. That is, their truth is based on what is happening in the world, not on what is happening in the language. Similarly, if my mother is an engineer rather than a doctor and the tiger is quite happy, we would say that these statements are SYNTHETICALLY FALSE.

**Analytic sentences****Contradictions****Synthetic sentences****Synthetically true****Synthetically false**

 EXERCISE

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**2.3** Assume that sentence (a) in each pair is synthetically true. Then look at sentence (b) and decide if you can assume that it is automatically true given the truth of (a).

- 1(a) *Annie caught a trout.*
  - 1(b) *Annie caught a fish.*
  - 2(a) *Annie is thin.*
  - 2(b) *Annie is not fat.*
  - 3(a) *Annie baked a cake.*
  - 3(b) *Annie baked something.*
- 

The answer is 'yes' in all three cases. Once we establish the truth of sentence (a), sentence (b) becomes automatically true because of the meaning relationships between *trout/fish*, *thin/fat*, and *cake/something*. In each case, we can say that sentence (b) is an ENTAILMENT of sentence (a). All sentences have a number of entailments. That is, other sentences which are automatically true if the original sentence is true. The thing about entailment is that this kind of inference is 'for free'. It requires only a knowledge of the semantic system of the language being used. At this point, you may be wondering whether a PARAPHRASE is the same thing as an entailment. In semantics, a paraphrase is a special kind of entailment. The next exercise will show you what I mean.

**Comment****Entailment****Paraphrase** EXERCISE

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**2.4** For each pair, decide whether you can assume that sentence (b) is automatically true given the synthetic truth of sentence (a). Then reverse the process. If sentence (b) is synthetically true, can you assume that sentence (a) is automatically true?

- 1(a) *Goldilocks saw a bear.*
  - 1(b) *Goldilocks saw an animal.*
  - 2(a) *This porridge is too cold.*
  - 2(b) *This porridge is not too hot.*
  - 3(a) *Baby Bear cried.*
  - 3(b) *Baby Bear wept.*
  - 4(a) *Mama Bear is in front of Papa Bear.*
  - 4(b) *Papa Bear is behind Mama Bear.*
-

**Comment****One-way entailment****Two-way entailment  
Mutual entailment**

As you can see, things get a bit more complicated when we look to see if the entailment works both ways. In sentence pairs 1 and 2, the entailment works in only one direction. If Goldilocks saw a *bear*, then she necessarily saw an *animal*. But if she saw an animal, she could have seen a bear but not necessarily. It could have been a big bad wolf, for example. If something is too *cold*, by definition it cannot be too *hot*. But if the porridge is not too hot, is it necessarily too cold? No. Like Baby Bear's porridge, it could be just right. When there is only ONE-WAY ENTAILMENT, the sentences are not true paraphrases of each other. Sentence pairs 3 and 4 behave somewhat differently. Because of the meaning relationship between *cried/wept* and *in front of/behind*, we have a situation of TWO-WAY OF MUTUAL ENTAILMENT between the sentences in each pair. These sentences are paraphrases of each other. The term paraphrase is used in semantics when there is a relationship of mutual entailment between two sentences. Generally speaking, 'entailment', 'analytic sentence' and 'contradiction' are considered to be purely semantic concepts, having to do with sentence meaning rather than speaker meaning. However, these issues can be quite relevant to the study of pragmatics as the next two exercises will illustrate.

**EXERCISE** 

**2.5** In each of the following dialogues, spot the information which appears redundant or contradictory from a semantic point of view. Then decide in pragmatic terms what this sort of information might be 'telling' the hearer.

- (a) Tom: What's your stepmother like?  
Bob: Well, she's a woman and she married my father.
- (b) Dave: There's your Uncle George.  
Lucy: That man's a snake.
- (c) Jane: You ate all the cookies!  
Steve: I ate some of the cookies.

**Comment**

In (a) Bob appears to be providing redundant information since his stepmother is necessarily a woman who married his father, given the meaning of *stepmother*. But is this kind of information always useless? Did you get the impression that Bob might not be particularly fond of his stepmother or that perhaps he has not met her yet? In (b) Lucy is providing an inherent contradiction. Semantically, a man is not a snake. However, from a pragmatic point of view, her answer makes a lot of sense. We can infer that she doesn't like her uncle. Dialogue (c) is tricky. Did you assume that Steve had not eaten all the cookies? Did he specifically say that he had not eaten all the cookies? From a purely logical point of view, if Steve ate all

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the cookies, then he also ate some of them on his way to eating all of them. (The meaning relation between *all/some* is similar to that between *trout/fish* in Exercise 2.3 and *bear/animal* in Exercise 2.4.) If Steve had eaten all the cookies, from a semantic point of view he was not lying. From a pragmatic point of view, well, what do you think? We will be returning to these issues in Units 4 and 5.

Take the sentence, *The painters broke the window*. This sentence has many entailments. Here are some very basic (one-way) entailments:

- Entailment 1: 'Someone broke the window.'  
 Entailment 2: 'The painters did something to the window.'  
 Entailment 3: 'The painters broke something.'

When uttering this sentence in context, a speaker will have one of these entailments in mind as the main focus, the most important one for interpreting the message. One way of communicating this to the hearer, or FOREGROUNDING a particular entailment, is by putting heavy stress on one of the words in an utterance. For example, by saying *The PAINTERS broke the window*, the speaker foregrounds **Entailment 1**. The sentence uttered in this particular way generally communicates the message: 'You and I are taking it for granted that someone broke the window. I'm telling you who did it.'

### Foregrounding

### EXERCISE

**2.6** Here are three different stress patterns for *Annie ruined the sweater*. Try matching each utterance with the entailment which is being foregrounded. While you are doing this, think how the message subtly changes with each change of stress.

- Utterance (a): Annie RUINED the sweater.  
 Utterance (b): Annie ruined the SWEATER.  
 Utterance (c): ANNIE ruined the sweater.  
 Entailment 1: 'Someone ruined the sweater.'  
 Entailment 2: 'Annie did something to the sweater.'  
 Entailment 3: 'Annie ruined something.'

Is your analysis similar to mine?

**Utterance (a)** has foregrounded **Entailment 2**. Message: 'You and I are taking it for granted that Annie did something to the sweater. I'm telling you what Annie did.'

**Utterance (b)** has foregrounded **Entailment 3**. Message: 'You and I are taking it for granted that Annie ruined something. I'm telling you what Annie ruined.'

**Utterance (c)** has foregrounded **Entailment 1**. Message: 'You and I are taking it for granted that someone ruined the sweater. I'm telling you that Annie did it.'

### Comment

Each of these different messages illustrates how more can be communicated than simply 'what is said'. The importance given to one entailment over another by a speaker has important consequences for the pragmatic analysis of that utterance.

### SUMMARY

- All sentences have a number of entailments – other sentences which are automatically true if the original sentence is true.
- Entailments are inferences that can be drawn solely from our knowledge about the semantic relationships in a language.
- This knowledge allows us to communicate much more than we actually 'say'.

### FURTHER EXERCISES

**2.7** Which of the following sentences cannot be designated as 'true' or 'false' unless you have extra non-linguistic information?

- (a) *My hamster is a mammal.*
- (b) *My cousin is a girl.*
- (c) *My sister is a girl.*
- (d) *My sister is female.*
- (e) *I saw a female rock.*
- (f) *I saw a female tortoise.*
- (g) *My cat likes ice-cream.*
- (h) *My sick cat is not well.*

**2.8** For each sentence (a)–(d) provide two entailments. One should be a one-way entailment as in these examples:

*Ed caught a trout* → *Ed caught a fish*  
Original sentence      Entailment

*The blimp was over the house* → *Something was over the house*  
Original sentence      Entailment

and one should be a two-way (mutual) entailment as in these examples:

*Ed caught a trout* ↔ *Ed captured a trout*  
Original sentence      Entailment

*The blimp was over the house* ↔ *The house was under the blimp*  
Original sentence      Entailment

Use → to show one-way entailment and ↔ to show two-way entailment. Every sentence has many possible entailments, but remember, in semantics an entailment must be automatically true solely by virtue of meaning relationships in the language, not by virtue of what usually happens in the world. For example, *Jane is intelligent* entails *Jane is not stupid* but does **not** entail *Jane does well at university* or

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*It's a fish*

entailment

→ *Something was over the house*  
Entailment

d) entailment as in these examples:

*It's a trout*

entailment

↔ *The house was under the blimp*  
Entailment

t and ↔ to show two-way entailments, but remember, they are not automatically true solely by virtue of the language, not by virtue of what is known. For example, *Jane is intelligent* entails *Jane does well at university* or

*even Jane is a woman.* (Jane could be a baby, or a pet hamster or a man with an unusual name. You need more than purely linguistic knowledge to say that 'she' is a woman.)

- (a) *My sister-in-law grows roses.*
- (b) *Steve is furious.*
- (c) *Tom sold a computer to Mark.*
- (d) *My brother repaired my car.*

**2.9** Write three analytic sentences, e.g. *My mother is a woman.* For each sentence, think of a context where the utterance of that apparently 'uninformative' sentence would be quite informative to the hearer.

**2.10** Write three sentences which are contradictions, e.g. *My mother is a boy.* For each sentence, think of a context where the utterance of that apparently 'nonsensical' sentence would still make sense to the hearer.

**2.11** The following are from *Howlers* by Russell Ash (1985) and *The 776 Stupidest Things Ever Said* by Ross and Kathryn Petras (1994). Where has the communication gone wrong? Or has it?

- (a) All creatures are imperfect beasts. Man alone is the perfect beast.
- (b) The brain of a woman is almost as heavy as a human brain.
- (c) A coroner's duty is to decide whether a person died a fatal death.
- (d) We do not have censorship. What we have is a limitation on what newspapers can report.
- (e) Snakes are two sexes, poisonous and non-poisonous.
- (f) I have reiterated over and over again what I have said before.

**2.12** Look at these pairs of utterances. The sentences being uttered in each pair are arguably semantic paraphrases of each other (in a relationship of mutual entailment). Do you think they communicate the same information?

- 1(a) That food was delicious.
- 1(b) That grub was yummy.
- 2(a) She designs clothes for adult male humans.
- 2(b) She designs clothes for men.

## SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 3(a) That guy's a bachelor.  
 3(b) That guy never got married.

**Cleft sentence**

**2.13** In Exercise 2.6 we noticed that heavy stress on a word can be used to foreground a particular entailment. Certain kinds of sentence structure can also do this and are particularly useful in written language where stress is not available. The second sentence here is called a CLEFT SENTENCE:

- (a) The PAINTERS broke the window. (spoken)  
 (b) It was the painters who broke the window. (written)

When the cleft construction is used in spoken language combined with heavy stress, some interesting meaning differences can emerge. Compare:

- (c) It wasn't ME who burnt the toast.  
 (d) It WASN'T me who burnt the toast.

**2.14** '... the entailments of a sentence can be regarded as those propositions that can be inferred from it in any context' (my underlining, Simpson, 1993: 122). What problems, if any, are posed for this definition by a sentence like *George saw a nut*?

**FURTHER READING**

For more about the role of entailment in pragmatic analysis:

- Yule, 1996, Chapter 4.  
 Simpson, 1993, Chapter 5.

For more about different meaning relationships between words and different types of entailment:

- Hurford and Heasley, 1988, Units 9–11.

# PRESUPPOSITION

# 3

ried.

at heavy stress on a word can entailment. Certain kinds of and are particularly useful in available. The second sentence

the window. (spoken)  
broke the window. (written)

in spoken language combined meaning differences can emerge.

the toast.  
at the toast.

sentence can be regarded as those in it in any context (my under- problems, if any, are posed for *George saw a nut?*)

ent in pragmatic analysis:

relationships between words and

units 9-11.

We look at presupposition, another kind of inference which is very closely linked to the 'working' of the utterance.

I celebrate myself and sing myself,  
And what I assume, you shall assume.  
(Walt Whitman)

In the USA, an accused mugger rather foolishly chose to defend himself at the trial. The following is one of the questions he put to his victim:

Did you get a good look at my face when I took your purse?

This goes some way to explaining why he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but it also highlights another type of inference that we make when interpreting utterances. In the previous unit we experimented with assigning 'true' or 'false' to sentences. For some sentences, like *My mother is a woman*, we could assign a TRUTH-VALUE based on what was happening in the language. For others, like *My mother is a doctor*, we could still assign a truth-value, but it had to be based on what was happening in the world.

Truth-value

## EXERCISE

3.1 Decide if it is possible to assign either 'true' or 'false' to each of the following sentences. (Remember, 'true' and 'false' are not quite the same as 'yes' and 'no'.) Are there any sentences where this was not quite possible regardless of how much knowledge you had about the people, places and events involved or the meaning of English words?

- (a) *Abraham Lincoln is the current president of the USA.*  
 (b) *The Eiffel Tower is in Paris.*  
 (c) *A car is an automobile.*  
 (d) *Have a cookie.*  
 (e) *Be careful of the crumbs.*  
 (f) *Where was Abraham Lincoln born?*  
 (g) *How much did the car cost?*

**Comment**

You could answer 'false' to (a) and 'true' to (b) based on your knowledge about the world. You could automatically answer 'true' to (c) based on your knowledge of what *car* and *automobile* mean. These three sentences have a particular kind of grammatical structure. They are **DECLARATIVE SENTENCES**. Declarative sentences typically function as 'statements'.

**Declarative sentences**

*You ran away.*

|            |  
 Subject    Verb

**Imperative sentences**

Problems in assigning 'true' or 'false' occur in sentences (d) to (g). These sentences do not have a declarative structure. Sentences (d) and (e) are **IMPERATIVE SENTENCES**. In imperative sentences, which typically function as 'commands', there is no subject present although it is 'understood' as *you*.

*Run away!*

|  
 Verb

**Interrogative sentences**

Sentences (f) and (g) are **INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES**. Interrogative sentences typically function as 'questions'. Some interrogatives begin with words like *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *how*, etc. Since the majority of these words begin with *wh-*, they are all usually called **WH-WORDS**.

**Wh-words**

*Why did you run away? Did you run away?*

|    |    |                    |    |    |  
 Verb Subject Verb            Verb Subject Verb

You will recall from **Unit 2** that the entailments of a sentence are other sentences which are automatically true if the original sentence is true. However, as we have seen, only declarative sentences can be 'true' or 'false'. Does this mean what we cannot draw some very strong inferences from utterances based on imperative and interrogative sentences?

## EXERCISE

**3.2** For each of the following utterances decide whether the sentence being uttered is declarative, imperative or interrogative and whether the accompanying inference seems valid.

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| (a) Where has Faye looked for the keys? | 'Faye has looked for the keys.' |
| (b) Did you buy this awful wine?        | 'This wine is awful.'           |
| (c) Don't sit on Annie's sofa.          | 'Annie has a sofa.'             |
| (d) Stop being lazy.                    | 'You are being lazy.'           |
| (e) Lucy knows that George is a crook.  | 'George is a crook.'            |

These inferences all seem quite obvious ones to make. They look suspiciously like entailments, yet only the sentence uttered in (e) is declarative. Sentences (a) and (b) are interrogatives, and sentences (c) and (d) are imperatives. These sorts of inferences are sometimes called **PRESUPPOSITIONS**. Since not all utterances consist of full declarative sentences, presupposition can be a useful concept when analysing speaker meaning. However, it has proved very difficult for authors in the area to agree on a definition for it. This definition problem is partly a reflection of the fuzzy boundary between pragmatics and semantics. Some definitions of presupposition are very broad and speaker oriented: anything the speaker assumes to be true before making the utterance. Others are much more narrow and sentence oriented: a necessary precondition for the sentence to be true. In these units we will be treating presuppositions as inferences about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true:

Faye has looked for the keys **directly asserts** 'Faye has looked for the keys'

Where has Faye looked for the keys? **presupposes** 'Faye has looked for the keys'

Annie has a sofa **directly asserts** 'Annie has a sofa'

Don't sit on Annie's sofa **presupposes** 'Annie has a sofa'

Presuppositions are inferences that are very closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance, but they come from our knowledge about the way language users **conventionally interpret** these words and structures. Because of this, presuppositions can be quite 'sneaky' as the next exercise will demonstrate.

## Comment

## Presuppositions

**EXERCISE** 

**3.3** In Exercise 3.2 change *has* to *hasn't* in (a); *did* to *didn't* in (b); *do* to *don't* in (c); *stop* to *don't stop* in (d); and *knows* to *doesn't know* in (e). Do the inferences still hold?

**Comment****Negation**

You will have found that each of these inferences, or presuppositions, remains constant under **NEGATION** of the main sentence. (Unfortunately for our mugger at the beginning of the unit, the inference that he took the purse would still hold whether or not his victim said she got a good look at his face.) This is sometimes used as a 'test' for a presupposition, and it highlights how a presupposition can take on the appearance of 'established truth'. In the next three exercises, we will look in a bit more detail at some of the kinds of words and structures that seem to 'trigger' presuppositions.

**EXERCISE** 

**3.4** Each of the following utterances mentions *chocolate cake*. Decide which ones contain the presupposition that at the time the utterance was made 'There was a chocolate cake'. What do those utterances have in common?

- 1(a) Mike might find the chocolate cake in the kitchen.
- 1(b) Mike might find a chocolate cake in the kitchen.
- 2(a) Is Mike giving Annie that chocolate cake?
- 2(b) Is Mike giving Annie a chocolate cake?
- 3(a) Did Mike hide a chocolate cake?
- 3(b) Did Mike hide Annie's chocolate cake?

**Comment****Possessives**  
**Definite noun phrase****Existential presupposition**

The (a) utterance in each pair leads us to presuppose that the chocolate cake being mentioned actually existed. What we notice is that in each of those utterances the noun *cake* is part of a larger noun phrase. The words *the*, *that*, *this*, *these*, *those*, and **POSSESSIVES** like *Annie's*, *my*, *your*, etc. make it a **DEFINITE NOUN PHRASE** and trigger this very basic kind of presupposition. Notice that possessives lead to a particularly strong presupposition about the existence of the chocolate cake, and in addition lead to the presupposition that 'Annie has a chocolate cake'. This basic type of presupposition is sometimes called an **EXISTENTIAL PRESUPPOSITION**. Look at how existential presupposition could work if I wanted to sell you some hair lotion:

You'll want DomeBeGone, my revolutionary cure for baldness.

is to *hasn't* in (a); *did* to *didn't* in (b); *is* to *isn't* in (c); *stop* in (d); and *knows* to *doesn't* in (e). Do these still hold?

of these inferences, or presuppositions. (NEGATION of the main sentence at the beginning of the unit, the inference still hold whether or not his victim's face.) This is sometimes used as a device to highlight how a presupposition is established. In the next two units, we will look at some of the kinds of presuppositions that 'trigger' presuppositions.

utterances mentions *chocolate cake*. What presupposition does this utterance contain? What does the speaker assume about the chocolate cake? What do those utterances presuppose?

chocolate cake in the kitchen.  
chocolate cake in the kitchen.

is that chocolate cake?  
is a chocolate cake?

chocolate cake?  
is a chocolate cake?

leads us to presuppose that the chocolate cake existed. What we notice is that the definite noun phrase *chocolate cake* is part of a larger noun phrase, *the chocolate cake*. These, *these*, and POSSESSIVES like *my* and *his* are TRIGGERS of a DEFINITE NOUN PHRASE and trigger a presupposition. Notice that possessives lead to a presupposition about the existence of the noun. This is the basic type of presupposition. PRESUPPOSITION. Look at how *my* and *his* trigger a presupposition about the existence of the noun. *My* and *his* presuppose that I have a chocolate cake if I wanted to sell you some.

my revolutionary cure for bald-

Here, I am directly asserting that 'You will want it' but inside the definite noun phrase *my revolutionary cure for baldness* lurk several quite dubious propositions which are simply assumed to be true:

- 'There is a cure for baldness.'
- 'The cure is revolutionary.'
- 'I have this cure.'

You can probably see that presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and in advertising. Advertisers are not allowed to directly assert claims about their products or their competitors' for which they have no evidence. However, they can generally get away with making indirect assertions via presupposition. In the courtroom, where the stakes are much higher than in advertising, lawyers examining witnesses are often not allowed to make an indirect assertion via presupposition, unless it has been established by previous evidence.

## EXERCISE

3.5 For each of the following utterances, decide which ones contain the presupposition that 'Mike smashed the television'. In other words, which ones indicate that the speaker has assumed that this proposition is true but has not directly asserted it. What do those utterances have in common?

- (a) Did Mike smash the television?
- (b) When did Mike smash the television?
- (c) I was eating popcorn when Mike smashed the television.
- (d) Why did Mike smash the television?
- (e) I don't understand why Mike smashed the television.
- (f) I wonder if Mike smashed the television.
- (g) I wonder how Mike smashed the television.

Here (b), (c), (d), (e), and (g) seem to presuppose that Mike smashed the television, while (a) and (f) leave it as an 'open question'. Words like *when*, *why*, *how*, etc. can trigger presuppositions both when they are used to ask a question as in (b) and (d) and when they introduce a SUBORDINATE CLAUSE as in (c), (e), and (g): *when/why/how Mike smashed the television*.

## Comment

### Subordinate clause

## EXERCISE

3.6 In this exercise we look at some other kinds of words and constructions that can lead to presuppositions. In each case write out a presupposition contained in the utterance and decide what has triggered it.

- (a) Steve regrets buying a dog.
- (b) Meridyth pretends she's a rock star.
- (c) Ed should stop eating raw oysters.

### Comment

Mine were: (a) 'Steve bought a dog'. (b) 'Meridyth is not a rock star'. (c) 'Ed eats raw oysters'. Interestingly, when hearers query presuppositions, they often explicitly query the wording that leads to them as well:

Steve could hardly regret it since he didn't buy the dog after all.

Pretend? I thought Meridyth WAS a rock star.

What do you mean 'stop'? Ed's never eaten a raw oyster in his life!

The use of *regret* in (a) triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fact'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *know*, *realize*, *discover* and *find out* as well as constructions like *I'm aware that ...* and *It's strange that ...*. On the other hand, the use of *pretend* in (b) triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fiction'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *imagine* and *dream* and constructions like *If I were ...* as in *If I were the Prime Minister, I'd ban presuppositions*. The use of *stop* in (c) triggers the presupposition that the action was going on before. Other verbs that can behave like this are *continue* and *keep*. On the other hand, *start* and *begin* can presuppose that the action was **not** going on before.

In this unit we have been looking at utterances in isolation, as if we had just passed by an open door and overheard a stranger talking. Presuppositions seem to be inferences that can be made with very little knowledge of the context. In the next unit we will start looking at inferences that require considerably more contextual knowledge and possibly more work for the hearer as well.

### SUMMARY

- We have described presuppositions as inferences about what is assumed in an utterance rather than directly asserted.
- Presuppositions are closely linked to the words and grammatical structures that are actually used in the utterance and our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret them.
- Presuppositions can be drawn even when there is little or no surrounding context.

 **FURTHER EXERCISES**

**3.7** In each case assume that the judge has sustained an objection to the question. What presupposition(s) might have been objected to?

- (a) How did you know that the defendant had bought a knife?
- (b) How long have you been selling cocaine?
- (c) When was your bracelet stolen?
- (d) Did you see the murdered woman before she left the office?
- (e) How fast was the car going when the driver ran the red light?
- (f) At what time did you telephone your lover?
- (g) Have you stopped being an active gang member?
- (h) Why did you leave the scene of the crime?

**3.8** In each of the following advertisement extracts, what claim or claims are being made by presupposition rather than directly asserted? (The names have been changed to protect the innocent.)

- (a) The secret to Blasee's effectiveness is Calming Fluid.
- (b) Look out for the distinctive packs in your local Bippo stockists and choose the one that's just right for you.
- (c) Watch all the puffiness and wrinkles disappear!
- (d) Increased protection against water spots.
- (e) Now you can get a really crisp professional finish.
- (f) It combines three potent skin perfecting discoveries in one gentle formula.

**3.9** Try your hand at being a tricky lawyer. Write some questions that attempt to sneak in the following 'facts' via presupposition. Here's a sample question for 'The defendant drove his car into a shop window': Did you brake before you drove your car into the shop window? Notice how if the defendant 'just answers the question', either Yes or No, he accepts the truth of the presupposition and admits that he drove his car into the shop window.

- (a) The defendant had a fight with his brother-in-law.
- (b) The defendant has three previous convictions.
- (c) The defendant belongs to a terrorist organization.
- (d) The defendant was speeding.

**3.10** Try your hand at being a tricky advertiser. Below are completely unsubstantiated claims about various products. For each one, write a line of advertisement that slips in the claim via presupposition. For the purposes of this exercise use full sentences. Your sentences

 **SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES**

can be declaratives, interrogatives or imperatives. In fact, you will find interrogatives and imperatives particularly useful in some cases.

- (a) ZONKO cures insomnia.
- (b) HappyHavens Inn has beautiful views.
- (c) KISSGOOD eliminates bad breath.
- (d) NO-ANT kills ants.
- (e) Crook & Sons Ltd employ skilled workers.
- (f) BLASTEX is not poisonous.
- (g) SHINO nourishes wood.
- (h) Dogs love YAPPY dog food.
- (i) Dentists use GRIN toothpaste.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**3.11** Since we have said that presuppositions arise from conventional interpretations, could we extend this to *and*? Here are some utterances to play with:

- (a) It was hot and very humid.
- (b) Ed ate the raw oysters and felt quite ill.
- (c) Ed got dressed and went to the office.

**3.12** Would you consider it unusual for a hearer to query an entailment?

**3.13** Do all of these utterances presuppose 'The boiler blew up'?

- (a) John got to safety before the boiler blew up.
- (b) John got to the safety valve before the boiler blew up.
- (c) John got to safety after the boiler blew up.
- (d) John got to the safety valve after the boiler blew up.

### FURTHER READING

For an interesting discussion of how presupposition fits into semantics and pragmatics:

Simpson, 1993, Chapter 5.

For more about the case of the exploding boiler:

Yule, 1996, pp. 99–100.

For a review of the problems in defining presupposition:

Leech, 1981, Chapter 14.

# THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND IMPLICATURE

We look at a third type of inferencing, implicature, and at how speakers co-operate in a conversation to achieve a shared meaning for utterances.

Don't quote what he says. Say what he means!  
(Senator Barry Goldwater's campaign aide to reporters)

## EXERCISE

4.1 What might the second speaker 'mean' in each of the following dialogues? Write a pragmatic paraphrase in each case, and think about how you inferred this meaning.

- (a) Virginia: Do you like my new hat?  
Mary: It's pink!
- (b) Maggie: Coffee?  
James: It would keep me awake all night.
- (c) Linda: Have you finished the student evaluation forms and the reading lists?  
Jean: I've done the reading lists.
- (d) Phil: Are you going to Steve's barbecue?  
Terry: Well, Steve's got those dogs now.
- (e) Annie: Was the dessert any good?  
Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.

**Comment**

Here are some possible paraphrases:

- (a) 'I don't like your hat.'
- (b) 'I won't have some coffee.'
- (c) 'I haven't done the evaluation forms.'
- (d) 'I don't think I'm going to Steve's barbecue.'
- (e) 'No, the dessert was pretty boring.'

There appear to be many ways of saying 'No'. Yet *no* or *not* did not appear in any of the original responses. You may have also found that you drew a somewhat different inference for some of these utterances. For example, not everyone infers that the speaker in (a) does not like the hat or that the speaker in (e) was not very keen on the dessert. These kinds of inferences or CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES, to use their technical term, seem to be less 'straightforward' than those based on entailment or presupposition.

**Conversational implicatures****EXERCISE** 

**4.2** Let's look at Mary's, James's, Jean's, Terry's and Mike's responses in **Exercise 4.1** – this time, with a different utterance from the first speaker. The content of the second speaker's utterance remains the same, but does the meaning remain the same? Write a pragmatic paraphrase for the second speaker's response in each dialogue.

- (a) Virginia: Try the roast pork.  
Mary: It's pink!
- (b) Maggie: We went to see *The Omen* last night but it wasn't very scary.  
James: It would keep me awake all night.
- (c) Linda: You look very pleased with yourself.  
Jean: I've done the reading lists.
- (d) Phil: His garden looks awful.  
Terry: Well, Steve's got those dogs now.
- (e) Annie: I thought the pie would cheer you up.  
Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.

**Comment**

Some typical pragmatic paraphrases are:

- (a) 'I'm not having the roast pork.'
- (b) 'I think *The Omen* is scary.'
- (c) 'I am pleased with myself, because I've done the reading lists.'
- (d) 'Steve's dogs have wrecked the garden.'
- (e) 'It takes more than cherry pie to cheer me up.'

As you can see, the context provided by the previous utterance can lead to quite a different implicature in each case.

**EXERCISE**

**4.3** Now we return to the **original** dialogues, (a), (b), and (e) in **Exercise 4.1**. How do you think the first speaker would interpret the second speaker's response if you had the following extra information?

- Pink is Mary's favourite colour and Virginia knows this.
- James has to stay up all night to study for an exam and Maggie knows this.
- Mike loves cherry pie. As far as he's concerned, no one can ruin a cherry pie, and Annie knows this.

Most people would now interpret the responses in (a), (b) and (e) to mean 'yes'. As you can see, drawing the appropriate implicature can require a considerable amount of shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

**Comment**

Just how we achieve this level of meaning was an issue tackled by the philosopher, Paul Grice. Grice proposed that all speakers, regardless of their cultural background, adhere to a basic principle governing conversation which he termed **THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE**. That is, we assume that in a conversation the participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions. Grice then broke this principle down into four basic **MAXIMS** which go towards making a speaker's contribution to the conversation 'co-operative':

**The co-operative principle**

**Maxims**

- 1 **RELEVANCE:** Make sure that whatever you say is relevant to the conversation at hand.
- 2 **QUALITY:** Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- 3 **QUANTITY:** Make your contribution sufficiently informative for the current purposes of the conversation. Do not make your contribution more informative than is necessary.
- 4 **CLARITY:** Do not make your contribution obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand.

**Relevance**

**Quality**

**Quantity**

**Clarity**

Grice pointed out that these maxims are not always observed, but he makes a distinction between 'quietly' **VIOLATING** a maxim and openly **FLOUTING** a maxim. Violations are 'quiet' in the sense that it is not obvious at the time of the utterance that the speaker has **deliberately** lied, supplied insufficient information, or been ambiguous, irrelevant or hard to understand. In Grice's analysis, these violations might hamper communication but they do not lead to implicatures. What leads to implicatures is a situation where the speaker **flouts** a maxim. That is, it is obvious to the hearer at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately and quite

**Violating  
Flouting**

openly failed to observe one or more maxims. To see how Grice's analysis might work in practice, try the next exercise.

### EXERCISE

**4.4** Suppose you were considering X for a job that needed good writing skills. You have written to his English teacher asking her to assess his performance in this area. You receive the following reply:

'X has regularly and punctually attended all my classes. All his assignments were handed in on time and very neatly presented. I greatly enjoyed having X in my class.'

- (a) What maxim does the teacher seem to flout?
- (b) What implicature would you draw about X's writing skills?
- (c) Why do you think the teacher phrased her response this way?

### Comment

(a) The teacher's response appears to flout the maxim of quantity. There is insufficient information about X's writing skills, yet we would assume that as his English teacher, she would have this information. (b) Most people infer that X's writing skills are not very good even though at no point is this explicitly stated. This is a classic example of 'damning with faint praise'. (c) Grice observed that in conversations, we are sometimes faced with a **CLASH** between maxims. Here the teacher knows that she should give an *informative* answer to the question (quantity). She also knows that she should only say what is *truthful* (quality). The teacher does not want to state baldly that the student's performance was not very good. (For example, she might think that X will see the reference letter.) At the same time she does not want to lie. So, she makes her response in such a way that the reader can infer this without her having to state it. According to Grice, the implicature is made possible by the fact that we normally assume that speakers do not really abandon the co-operative principle.

### Clash

Following Grice's reasoning, the inference is worked out like this:

- 1 Since I have good reason to believe that she has information about X's writing skills, the speaker has deliberately failed to observe (flouted) the maxim 'Be informative'.
- 2 But I have no reason to believe that she has really opted out of the co-operative principle. So, she is only being **apparently** uninformative.
- 3 If I draw the inference that X hasn't got very good writing skills, then the speaker is being co-operative. She knows that I am capable of working this out.
- 4 Therefore, she has implied (or 'implicated' to use Grice's term) that the student's writing skills are not very good.

more maxims. To see how Grice's try the next exercise.

As you can see, this sort of inferencing occurs in stages. In the first stage, the hearer recognizes the apparent irrelevancy, inadequacy, lack of clarity, etc. This in turn triggers the implicature.

 EXERCISE

4.5 Speech therapist:

So you like ice-cream.  
What are your favourite  
flavours?

Child with a pragmatic disorder: Hamburger . . . fish and  
chips

(Adapted from Bishop, 1997, p. 183)

Which maxim has the child failed to observe? Would you consider this a case of flouting or violation of that maxim?

Comment

The child, who has not realized that *favourite flavours* should be interpreted as 'favourite flavours of ice-cream' rather than 'favourite flavours in general', has failed to observe the maxim of relevance. He generally has difficulty taking the context into account when making his contribution in a conversation. Because his irrelevance is not deliberate, we would view this as a violation rather than a flouting of the maxim. Had I only labelled the speakers 'A' and 'B', would you have interpreted B's utterance as a joke? Humour based on taking liberties with the co-operative principle is a frequent feature in comic writing. The Marx Brothers, for example, are famous for their anarchic approach to conversation.

(The ship's captain is looking for stowaways, one of whom is Groucho.)

Groucho: Yeah? What do they look like?

Captain: One goes around with a black mustache.

Groucho: Well, you couldn't expect a mustache to go around by itself. Don't you think a mustache ever gets lonely, Captain?

(Anobile, 1972, p. 57)

(Groucho has just become the new head of Huxley College.)

Professor: My dear Professor, I'm sure the students would appreciate a brief outline of your plans for the future.

Groucho: What?

Professor: I said the students would appreciate a brief outline of your plans for the future.

Groucho: You just said that. That's the trouble around here. Talk, talk, talk! Oh sometimes I think I must go mad. Where will it all end?

(Anobile, 1972, p. 101)

needed good  
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his explicitly stated. This is a classic  
praise'. (c) Grice observed that in  
es faced with a CLASH between  
that she should give an *informative*  
(. She also knows that she should  
The teacher does not want to state  
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s writing skills are not very good.

**SUMMARY**

- Unlike presuppositions and entailments, implicatures are inferences that cannot be made from isolated utterances. They are dependent on the context of the utterance and shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.
- Grice has proposed a way of analysing implicatures based on the co-operative principle and its maxims of relevance, quality, quantity and clarity.
- In Grice's analysis, the speaker's flouting of a maxim combined with the hearer's assumption that the speaker has not really abandoned the co-operative principle leads to an implicature.

**FURTHER EXERCISES** 

**4.6** In each of the following decide whether the inference in brackets is a presupposition or an implicature derived from the underlined utterance.

- (a) A: My boyfriend lives in Luton  
B: My boyfriend lives in Paris. (I have a boyfriend)
- (b) A: What?  
B: Why are you laughing at me? (You are laughing at me)
- (c) A: Why is she eating those?  
B: Her father didn't give her any supper. (She didn't have any supper)
- (d) A: Is Mike engaged?  
B: He's bought a ring. (Mike is engaged)
- (e) A: You look pleased.  
B: I managed to pass the exam. (I tried to pass the exam)
- (f) A: Did you finish that report?  
B: I started it. (I didn't finish the report)

**4.7** In each case below decide which maxim has not been observed. Then decide whether this was a case of **flouting** or **violation**. Where you think there has been a case of flouting, what implicature might be drawn? Background information is given in square brackets.

- (a) Annie: Mike, did you pass the driving test?  
Mike: No. [Mike knows he's passed the driving test]
- (b) Annie: Do you want seconds?  
Mike: gmmm uh mmm [Mike's just had his wisdom teeth extracted]

- (c) Annie: I really liked that dinner.  
Mike: I'm a vegetarian.
- (d) Teacher: What time is it? [towards the end of a lecture]  
Student: It's 10:44 and 35.6 seconds.
- (e) Student A: How are you?  
Student B: I'm dead.
- (f) Host: Would you like a cocktail? It's my own invention.  
Guest: Well, mmm uh it's not that we don't not drink.

**4.8** Return to Exercise 4.1, and decide which maxim was flouted by the second speaker in each dialogue.

**4.9** Here are three implicatures: 'I don't like it'; 'Steve hates cats'; 'Ed is lazy'. For each of these implicatures write two different dialogues which could lead to that implicature. Each dialogue should involve the flouting of a different maxim. Here are two examples for the implicature 'I'm not going':

- 1 A: We're going to the movies.  
B: I've got an exam tomorrow.

**Relevance:** the speaker's exam is not apparently relevant to a discussion about going to the movies.

- 2 A: Are you going to Steve's barbecue?  
B: A barbecue is an outdoor party.

**Quantity:** stating that a barbecue is an outdoor party is apparently both too informative (since people know that a barbecue is an outdoor party) and not informative enough since B has not directly answered the question.

**4.10** Speakers often show they are aware of the co-operative principle when they use 'HEDGES' which indicate that they may be violating a maxim. What maxim is being alluded to in each case?

- (a) I don't mean to change the subject, but there's an enormous wasp in here.  
(b) This is a bit convoluted but . . .  
(c) Well, I think he's honest.  
(d) You probably already know this but . . .

 **SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES**

**Hedges**

**DISCUSSION  
QUESTIONS**

**4.11** Why might speakers call attention to the fact that they may be violating a maxim? Think of some other common hedges that are used in this way.

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**4.12** Gesture, facial expression and tone of voice cannot be recreated on the printed page, and yet a great deal of the communication in a conversation involves these channels. Take the dialogues in **Exercise 4.1** and see if you could make the second speakers' responses imply 'yes' rather than 'no' simply by using particular gestures, facial expressions or tones of voice to accompany the utterance.

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**4.13** Blakemore (1992) has pointed out that we generally do not assume speakers to be communicating unless we assume they are rational, or in other words, unless we think they are conforming to certain norms and standards. Do you agree? To start you thinking, here are some sample utterances from two schizophrenic patients. (You might also want to include the data from the Marx Brothers in your discussion.)

Doctor: Good morning.

Patient A: A real magnanimous good morning to you on this first Wednesday of our glorious New Year.

Doctor: Where should we send it?

Patient B: Kindly send it to me at the hospital. Send it to me, Joseph Nemo, in care of Joseph Nemo and me who answers to the name of Joseph Nemo will care for it myself.

(Data adapted from Obler and Menn, 1982)

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**FURTHER  
READING**

For more about Grice's theories:

Grice, 1989 (quite advanced) or Yule, 1996, pp. 100-1 for a short extract from Grice.

For a very interesting discussion of children with pragmatic disorders:

Bishop, 1997, Chapters 7 and 8.

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# MORE ON IMPLICATURES

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We look in more detail at different kinds of implicatures and find that some are less dependent on background knowledge of the context than others.

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ne at the hospital. Send it  
O, in care of Joseph Nemo  
ers to the name of Joseph  
it myself.

from Obler and Menn, 1982)

And, after all, what is a lie?  
'Tis but the truth in masquerade.  
(Byron, *Don Juan*)

## EXERCISE

5.1 For each dialogue, answer the accompanying question based on the implicature that you can draw from the second speaker's response. Think about why you drew those implicatures.

- (a) Carmen: Did you get the milk and the eggs?  
Dave: I got the milk.  
Did Dave buy the eggs?
- (b) Carmen: Did you manage to fix that leak?  
Dave: I tried to.  
Did Dave fix the leak?
- (c) Faye: I hear you've invited Mat and Chris.  
Ed: I didn't invite Mat.  
Did Ed invite Chris?
- (d) Steve: What happened to your flowers?  
Jane: A dog got into the garden.  
Did the dog belong to Jane?

Yule, 1996, pp. 100-1 for a

ren with pragmatic disorders:

**Comment**

Most people would draw the implicatures:

- (a) 'Dave did not buy the eggs.'
- (b) 'Dave did not fix the leak.'
- (c) 'Ed invited Chris.'
- (d) 'The dog did not belong to Jane.'

These implicatures are based on the quantity of information offered by the speaker. In (a) and (c) we notice that the first speaker's utterance contains *and*. In (a) Carmen is really asking two questions: *Did you buy the milk?* and *Did you buy the eggs?* Similarly, in (c) Faye mentions two propositions: *You invited Mat* and *You invited Chris*. When only one of the questions or propositions has been mentioned in the response, we normally assume that the speaker is still adhering to the co-operative principle and therefore is implying a response for the second one as well. And, we normally take it to be the opposite of the one mentioned. If Dave had bought the eggs as well, he would have said so. If Ed had not invited Chris as well, he would have said so. In (b) the implicature comes from the word *try*. Trying to fix the leak is an intermediate step to managing to fix the leak. The fact that Dave only mentioned the intermediate step leads us to infer that he did not make it to the final step. The implicature in (d) is based on the use of the INDEFINITE ARTICLE *a/an*. We infer that if the dog had belonged to Jane, she would have referred to it as *my dog*. In a more general sense, when the speaker uses the expression *a/an X* we draw the implicature 'not the speaker's X'.

Our expectations about the quantity of information that speakers will provide in an utterance also lead to other common implicatures, as we will see in the next two exercises.

**Indefinite article****EXERCISE** 


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**5.2** If you were Jane, what implicatures would you have drawn from each of Steve's responses?

- (a) Jane: Who used all the printer paper?  
Steve: I used some of it.
- (b) Jane: I hear you're always late with the rent.  
Steve: Well, sometimes I am.
- (c) Jane: Mike and Annie should be here by now. Was their plane late?  
Steve: Possibly.

Now look at this dialogue. Would you normally infer that Steve had not kept the cheese in the freezer?

- (d) Jane: This cheese looks funny. The label said to store it in a cool place.  
Steve: Yeah, I did.
-

Most people draw the following implicatures:

- (a) 'Steve did not use all of the printer paper, only some of it.'
- (b) 'Steve is not always late with the rent, only sometimes.'
- (c) 'Steve did not know for certain that the plane was late.'
- (d) 'Steve did not freeze the cheese.'

**Comment**

**EXERCISE**

**5.3** Now examine those implicatures in light of the following information known only to Steve. Would you say that Steve was lying to Jane in **Exercise 5.2**? Why?

- (a) Steve has in fact used all the printer paper.
- (b) Steve has been late with the rent every month since he moved in.
- (c) Steve knows for a fact that the plane was late because Mike and Annie called him from the airport.
- (d) Steve had absentmindedly put the cheese in the freezer and thawed it out before dinner hoping that Jane wouldn't notice.

**Comment**

**Scalar implicatures**

You will recall from **Unit 2** that from a semantic point of view, because *all* logically entails *some*, Steve's response in (a) is technically true. The same kind of logic applies to (b)–(d) as well. However, from a pragmatic point of view, Steve's utterances have certainly misled Jane because of the implicatures that people normally draw in these circumstances. Steve's trickery involved what we call **SCALAR IMPLICATURES**. All of Steve's responses use words that participate in a scale of values:

- Scale of quantity: *some most all*
- Scale of frequency: *sometimes often always*
- Scale of coldness: *cool cold freezing*
- Scale of likelihood: *possibly probably certainly*

We normally assume (following the co-operative principle) that, where speakers have a scale of values at their disposal, they will choose the one that is truthful (maxim of quality) and optimally informative (maxim of quantity). So, we normally draw the implicature 'not any of the higher values on the scale'. In other words, if Steve has chosen the word *sometimes*, it creates the implicatures 'not always' and 'not often'. It appears that in each case Steve has technically adhered to the quality maxim but violated quantity. Nevertheless, most of us would think that from a pragmatic point of view Steve was lying since he knew that anybody would draw those inferences.

Have you noticed that while the implicatures we have been looking at require a previous utterance, they are so 'strong' that they do not

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**Generalized  
conversational  
implicatures**

seem to require any extra knowledge to extract the meaning? These types of implicatures are sometimes called **GENERALIZED CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES**.

**EXERCISE** 

**5.4** Look at each of these dialogues and the implicatures which appear in brackets. Then decide what knowledge the speaker and hearer would have to share in order for that implicature to be drawn:

- (a) Tom: Are you going to Mark's party tonight?  
Annie: My parents are in town. ('No')
- (b) Tom: Where's the salad dressing?  
Gabriela: We've run out of olive oil. ('There isn't any salad dressing')
- (c) Steve: What's with your mother?  
Jane: Let's go into the garden. ('I can't talk about it in here')
- (d) Mat: Want some fudge brownies?  
Chris: There must be 20,000 calories there. ('No')

**Comment**

For (a) both parties would have to know about Annie's relationship with her parents. For example, if they both knew that Annie tried to avoid her parents at every opportunity, the implication would be 'Yes'. For (b) both parties would have to have some general knowledge – olive oil is a possible ingredient in salad dressing. But both parties also need to share the knowledge that they only use salad dressing made from olive oil. For (c) there would have to be something in the physical context of the utterance to suggest that someone might overhear Jane's answer. For example, if there was no one else present, Steve might well infer that the problem with Jane's mother has something to do with the garden. For (d) both parties again need some general knowledge – food with a high number of calories makes people put on weight. But both parties would also need to share the knowledge that Chris is trying to lose weight. If they both knew that he was trying to gain weight, the implication would be 'Yes'. Inferences which require this kind of shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer are sometimes called **PARTICULARIZED CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES**.

**Particularized  
conversational  
implicatures**

At this point, you may be wondering about generalized implicatures. They seem so conventional and require so little contextual knowledge that perhaps they are really the same as presuppositions. There is a test that is sometimes used to distinguish presuppositions from implicatures.

 **EXERCISE**

**5.5** Here are four dialogues where Annie has 'cancelled' either a presupposition contained in her utterance or an implicature that could be drawn from her utterance (the cancellation comes after the 'dash'). Do you notice a difference between presuppositions and implicatures when they are cancelled?

(a) Cancelling an existential presupposition:

Mike: What happened?

Annie: Steve's dog wrecked the garden - and in fact, Steve doesn't have a dog.

(b) Cancelling a 'lexical' presupposition:

Mike: What's up?

Annie: I've stopped smoking - although I've never smoked.

(c) Cancelling a generalized implicature:

Mike: What's happened to the shampoo?

Annie: I used most of it - actually, I used all of it.

(d) Cancelling a particularized implicature:

Mike: Are you coming to the party?

Annie: My parents are in town - but I am coming.

When a speaker cancels a presupposition, the results usually sound rather contradictory or incoherent. However, when both generalized and particularized implicatures are cancelled, the results usually sound much more 'normal'.

There is a further level to the analysis of speaker meaning which we have not explored yet. For example, dialogue (c) could also be analysed as Mike's **accusation** followed by Annie's **confession**. In the next two units we will be looking at this level of analysis.

**Comment**

**SUMMARY**

- We have distinguished two types of conversational implicatures: generalized and particularized.
- Generalized implicatures can be drawn with very little 'inside' knowledge. If you heard a tape recording of the conversation but knew nothing about the participants or the physical characteristics of the context, you could still draw those implicatures. They are closely connected to the degree of informativeness that we normally expect a speaker's utterance to provide.
- Scalar implicatures are a special type of generalized implicature where the inference is made by reference to a scale of values, one of which has been chosen by the speaker. The speaker's choice implicates 'not the higher values'.

- Particularized implicatures require not only general knowledge but also knowledge which is particular or 'local' to the speaker and the hearer, and often to the physical context of the utterance as well.
- Both generalized and particularized implicatures differ from presuppositions in that they sound much less contradictory when they are cancelled by the speaker.

### FURTHER EXERCISES

**5.6** Apply the cancellation test we used in **Exercise 5.5** to decide whether each of the inferences in brackets is a presupposition or an implicature.

- (a) Linda: What's with Jean?  
Jen: She discovered that her central heating's broken. ('Her central heating is broken')
- (b) Terry: How do you like your bath?  
Phil: Warm. ('I don't like it hot')
- (c) Annie: What do you think of this necklace and bracelet?  
Mike: The bracelet is beautiful. ('The necklace is not beautiful')
- (d) Lois: Has the kitchen been painted?  
Gabriela: Tom's away. ('No')
- (e) Jane: Have you seen my sweater?  
Steve: There's a sweater on the sofa. ('It's not Steve's sweater')
- (f) Mike: How come Mary's all dressed up?  
Annie: We're going to the D-E-N-T-I-S-T. ('Mary hates the dentist')
- (g) Austin: It works now.  
Barbara: When did Eric fix it? ('Eric fixed it')

**5.7** Which of the inferences in **Exercise 5.6** are generalized implicatures? Which ones are particularized implicatures?

### SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

**5.8** Apply the cancellation test we used in **Exercises 5.5** and **5.6** to decide whether each of the inferences in brackets is a presupposition or an implicature. For the implicatures, decide whether they are generalized or particularized.

- (a) Mike: I heard about the mess.  
Dave: Yeah, Steve really regrets sending that e-mail. ('Steve sent that e-mail')

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- (b) Patrick: I didn't take it.  
Virginia: Why do you always lie? ('You always lie')
- (c) Doris: Did Carmen like the party?  
Dave: She left after an hour. ('She didn't like the party')
- (d) Mat: How did you do on those exams?  
Chris: I failed physics. ('I didn't fail the others')
- (e) Reporter: Senator, what is the present state of your marriage?  
Senator: Well, we, I think have been able to make some very good progress and it's - I would say that it's - it's - it's delightful that we're able to - to share the time and the relationship that we - that we do share. ('The marriage is not in a good state')
- (f) Steve: Did you buy the car?  
Ed: It cost twice as much as I thought it would. ('Ed didn't buy the car')
- (g) Maggie: The bathroom's flooded!  
James: Someone must have left the tap on. ('It wasn't James who left the tap on')

19 For the particularized implicatures in Exercises 5.6 and 5.8, what sort of particular or 'local' knowledge is needed to draw that implicature? What sorts of general knowledge do they require? Try creating scenarios where changing the 'local' knowledge would lead to quite different implicatures.

20 We have pointed out that generalized implicatures tend to be based on a flouting of the quantity maxim. That is, on the surface they are noticeably less informative than we would expect. What sorts of maxims were flouted in each of the particularized implicatures in Exercise 5.6?

21 There is a semantic relationship between words called *hyponymy*. Here are some examples of hyponymy:

<i>Hyponym</i>	<i>Super-ordinate</i>
rose	flower
salmon	fish
hammer	tool

In the relation of **HYPONYMY** the meaning of the **SUPER-ORDINATE** term is included in the meaning of the **HYPONYM**. That is, the

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Hyponymy**  
**Super-ordinate**  
**Hyponym**

meaning of *rose* includes the meaning of *flower*. We can also say that the hyponym is 'a kind of' the super-ordinate. For example, a rose is a kind of flower. Note also that the entailment relationship between hyponyms and their super-ordinates is one-way (see **Exercise 2.4**). For example, *I picked a rose* entails *I picked a flower*, but *I picked a flower* does not necessarily entail *I picked a rose*. Discuss the types of implicatures that can be drawn in the following dialogues which exploit the relation of hyponymy. Would you class some of these as generalized implicatures?

- (a) Mike: Did you buy her a rose?  
Annie: I bought her a flower.
- (b) Jane: There's salmon on the menu.  
Steve: I don't like fish.
- (c) Ed: Be careful of that sofa.  
Meridyth: It's a piece of furniture, Dad.
- (d) Mat: So you've taken up teaching.  
Chris: It's a job.

#### Co-ordinating conjunctions

**5.12** In **Discussion Question 3.11** we looked at some conventional meanings for *and*. Look back at the examples given there. Could we characterize *and* as creating different implicatures in each case? Explore the effects of two other CO-ORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS, *but* and *or*. Here are some examples to get you started.

- (a) Tom stayed but Mark left.  
(b) Tom stayed but Bill stayed too.  
(c) Stop that or I'll leave.  
(d) Do you want milk or juice?

#### Auxiliary verbs

**5.13** Can AUXILIARY VERBS like *should*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *will* create scalar implicatures? For example, compare *You should wash the dishes* and *You must wash the dishes*.

#### FURTHER READING

The idea that presuppositions do not 'survive' cancellation as well as implicatures can be problematic. For more on this debate see:

Simpson, 1993, pp. 133–40.

Grice's work was an important first step in systematically examining how hearers work to derive the ultimate message from the words that are actually uttered. He recognized that, of all the maxims, relevance was probably the most important, although he never really tackled the issue of how speakers and hearers actually assign relevance to particular pieces of information. Sperber and Wilson have

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carried this work forward by looking even more systematically at  
the various kinds of inferencing that take place in normal conver-  
sation. They suggest that all four maxims can be subsumed under  
relevance. See:

Sperber and Wilson, 1986 (quite challenging).

For a ‘beginner’s’ introduction to Sperber and Wilson’s theories:

Blakemore, 1992.

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# 6

## SPEECH ACTS

We look at inferences about what speakers are trying to accomplish with their utterances and introduce speech-act theory.

The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically.

(Austin, 1975, p. 1)

Thus began a series of lectures by the philosopher, J.L. Austin, which were given at Harvard University in 1955 and later published under the title *How to Do Things with Words*.

### EXERCISE

**6.1** Decide if you could perform each of the following actions by either speaking or physical gesture:

- (a) Congratulate someone.
- (b) Call someone's attention to the television set.
- (c) Forbid someone to enter a room.

### Comment

(a) Yes. By saying Congratulations! or by giving someone a pat on the back or the thumbs up sign. (b) Yes. By saying Look at the television or by pointing to it. (c) Yes. By saying I forbid you to enter or by wagging your finger at the person (as often happens to inappropriately dressed visitors to Italian churches).

The proverbs *Actions speak louder than words* and *Easier said than done* seem to make a clear distinction between speaking and acting. However, Austin pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, there is often no clear distinction between the two. He was one of the first modern scholars to recognize that 'words' are in themselves actions and that these SPEECH ACTS can and should be systematically studied.

Speech acts

## EXERCISE

**6.2** One way of describing what the following utterances do is to say that they describe a state of affairs. But think of some contexts where each of these assertions does much more than simply describe a state of affairs:

- (a) There's a spider in your hair.
- (b) Someone's eaten all the ice-cream.
- (c) I've got a gun.
- (d) You're an idiot.
- (e) I need the salt.

(a) Your friend is about to run his fingers through his hair: **warning**.  
 (b) You confront your flat mate about the missing ice-cream: **accusing**.  
 (c) Spoken by someone in a mask to a bank cashier: **threatening**.  
 (d) You have been offended and want revenge: **insulting**.  
 (e) You say this to someone at the table who is sitting near the salt: **requesting**.  
 When contextualized, these utterances are doing far more than simply asserting. This is not to say that assertion is not involved in these utterances, but rather that there is a more basic purpose behind them. Austin wanted to counter a commonly held view by semanticists that the sole purpose of making assertions is to describe some state of affairs. That view is sometimes called the **DESCRIPTIVE FALLACY**.

Comment

So far we have restricted ourselves to analysing utterances consisting of declarative sentences, but utterances based on imperative and interrogative sentences can also be analysed in terms of what the utterance **does**.

Descriptive fallacy

## EXERCISE

**6.3** Classify each of the following utterances as interrogative, imperative or declarative (see **Exercise 3.1** for examples of each type). Then decide what the speaker is using the utterance to do.

- (a) You can pass the milk.
- (b) Why don't you pass the milk?
- (c) Have you got the milk?
- (d) I could use the milk.

- (e) Get me the milk.  
 (f) Send the milk down here.

**Comment**

Despite the fact that (e) and (f) are imperatives, (b) and (c) are interrogatives and (a) and (d) are declaratives, all six utterances can be acts of **requesting** (milk in this case).

**Locution  
Illocution****Illocutionary force**

Austin pointed out that in analysing a speech act, we need to make a distinction between the **LOCUTION** and the **ILLOCUTION**. The **locution** is the actual form of words used by the speaker and their semantic meaning. The **illocution** (OR **ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE**) is what the speaker is doing by uttering those words: **commanding, offering, promising, threatening, thanking**, etc. Below is an example of how this two-way analysis can work for Mike's utterance to Annie: Give me some cash.

**LOCUTION:** Mike uttered the words *Give me some cash* which can be semantically paraphrased as: 'Hand some money over to me', with *me* referring to *Mike*.

**ILLOCUTION:** Mike performed the **act of requesting** Annie to give him some cash.

We need to distinguish between the illocution and the locution because, as we saw in **Exercise 6.3**, different locutions can have the same illocutionary force. Similarly, the same locution can have different illocutionary forces depending on the context. For example, *It's cold in here* could either be a **request** to close the window or an **offer** to close the window.

**Perlocution**

Austin also distinguished a third part of a speech act, the **PERLOCUTION**. This is the actual result of the locution. It may or may not be what the speaker wants to happen but it is nevertheless caused by the locution. For example, Mike's utterance could have any of the following perlocutions: 'Mike persuaded Annie to give him the money'; 'Annie refused to give him the money'; 'Annie was offended', etc. As you can see, the perlocution is defined by the hearer's reaction.

**EXERCISE** 

**6.4** Look at the following pairs of utterances. What difference do you notice between the utterances in each pair?

- 1(a) I promise to be there.  
 1(b) I'll be there.  
 2(a) I admit I was foolish.  
 2(b) I was foolish.  
 3(a) I warn you, this gun is loaded.  
 3(b) This gun is loaded.

- 4(a) I apologize.  
4(b) I'm sorry.

Austin made an interesting observation. Some utterances not only perform a speech act over and above simple assertion, they also simultaneously describe the speech act itself. He called these **PERFORMATIVE** utterances (the (a) utterances in each pair). They contrast with other utterances which may be performing the same act but do not contain a **PERFORMATIVE VERB** that explicitly describes the intended speech act. Rather, the hearer is left to infer the speaker's intention. Austin called these **CONSTATIVE** utterances (the (b) utterances in each pair). Below we illustrate the two types. The underlined words are the **PERFORMATIVE VERBS**.

*Performative*

- I promise I'll be there.  
I admit I was foolish.  
I warn you, this gun is loaded.  
I apologize.  
I thank you.  
I order you to sit down.

*Constative*

- I'll be there.  
I was foolish.  
This gun is loaded.  
I'm sorry.  
I'm very grateful.  
You must sit down.

However, the fact that an utterance contains a performative verb does not necessarily make the utterance itself performative, as we will see in the next exercise.

**Comment**

**Performative**

**Performative verb**

**Constative**

**Performative verbs**

**EXERCISE**

**6.5** In each of the groups below only the (a) utterances would be performative in Austin's view. Think about why the (b) and (c) utterances would not be classed as performative.

- 1(a) I admit I was wrong.  
1(b) I think I was wrong.  
1(c) I know I was wrong.  
2(a) I apologize to you.  
2(b) I amuse you.  
2(c) I flatter you.  
3(a) We promise to leave.  
3(b) He admits he was silly.  
3(c) I warned you to stop.

In group 1 the problem with (b) and (c) is that while admitting is an action that can be performed by speaking, thinking and knowing are not. So, *think* and *know* are not performative verbs.

**Comment**

In group 2 *apologize*, *amuse* and *flatter* all describe things we can do with speech. However, to be performative, the verb must describe an action which is under the control of the speaker. We can potentially amuse or flatter someone with speech but the ultimate decision to be amused or flattered rests with the hearer. Compare: (a) I'm trying to apologize. (b) I'm trying to amuse you. (c) I'm trying to flatter you. Only in (a) is there a clear implication that the speaker is being prevented from speaking (or being heard). One way of thinking about this is that *apologize* refers to an illocution while *flatter* and *amuse* refer to perlocutions.

In group 3 each of the verbs is performative. However in (b) the subject of the verb is not the speaker: *I* or *we*. He admits he was silly simply states what 'he' is doing but does not **perform** his act of admission. Even when the subject of the performative verb is *I* or *we*, as in (c) the verb must be in the simple present tense not the past tense. For example, if you were expecting an apology from me would you prefer I apologize or I apologized?

### EXERCISE

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**6.6** Insert the word *hereby* before the verb in all nine utterances in Exercise 6.5. For example: I hereby I admit I was wrong; I hereby think I was wrong. Does this produce odd results in some cases? Why?

---

### Comment

Although *hereby* does not frequently occur in ordinary conversation and can make any utterance seem a bit stilted, it seems to sound particularly odd when the utterance is not performative. The 'hereby test' is quite a reliable one.

Austin's distinction between performative and constative utterances is not without problems, as another philosopher of language, J.R. Searle, has pointed out. How do we interpret I'll be there on its own as a promise? Austin had proposed that this can be expanded to a full form including the performative verb – I promise I'll be there. In Searle's view, this made the distinction between performatives and constatives rather artificial, since in theory any constative utterance can be expanded to a performative one. Besides, this does not really tackle the question of how the hearer would assign the appropriate illocutionary force to utterances which do not contain performative verbs. How do we know that the speaker means 'I **promise** I'll be back' rather than 'I **threaten** I'll be back'? What about Coffee? How does the hearer 'compute' from this one word 'I **offer** you a coffee'? How do we manage to interpret Can you pass the milk? not as 'I **inquire** if you are able to pass the milk' but rather as 'I **request** you to pass the milk'. We will be exploring these issues in the next unit.

## SUMMARY

- Utterances can be analysed as speech acts, a framework originally proposed by J.L. Austin.
- Speech acts can be analysed on three levels: the **locution** (the words the speaker uses); the **illocution**, or **illocutionary force** (what the speaker is doing by using those words); the **perlocution** (the effect of those words on the hearer).
- Austin proposed that utterances can be classified as **performative** or **constative**. Performatives like *I apologize* simultaneously state and perform the illocution. Constatives can also be used to perform an illocution but, unlike performatives, they do not explicitly name the intended illocutionary act.

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**6.7** Decide whether each of the utterances below is performative, and if not, why not.

- (a) You congratulate me.
- (b) I envy you.
- (c) I command you to put out that cigarette.
- (d) I warned you not to go.
- (e) Put your toys away!
- (f) We convince everyone with our arguments.

---

**6.8** Using the locution, illocution, perlocution analysis in the discussion following Exercise 6.3, analyse Steve's utterance.

Jane: You've interrupted me again!  
 Steve: I was rude.

---

**6.9** Give as many different illocutions as you can for the locutions: *I'm sorry* and *This gun is loaded*. Describe the context in which each of those illocutions would apply.

---

**6.10** Choose a particular illocutionary force (e.g. **apology**, **threat**, **request**) and give at least five different locutions which could express that force.

---

**6.11** Give three possible perlocutions for the locution: *I love coffee*.

---

**6.12** The expressions below refer to 'things we can do with words'. Which ones focus on the speaker's action and which ones focus on the hearer's reaction?


**FURTHER EXERCISES**

**SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES**

- (a) offend
- (b) mock
- (c) offer condolences
- (d) convince
- (e) argue
- (f) console

---

**6.13** Find at least one performative verb that could produce the perlocution referred to by each of the following verbs:

- (a) scare
- (b) persuade
- (c) confuse
- (d) entertain
- (e) impress
- (f) placate
- (g) inspire

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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**6.14** Performative utterances can be worded in such a way that they do not require *I* or *we* as the subject. Apply the 'hereby test' to each of the following to determine which ones are performative. What allows them to pass the test?

- (a) I forbid you to spit on the pavement.
- (b) Spitting on the pavement is forbidden.
- (c) Spitting on the pavement was forbidden.
- (d) You are forbidden to spit on the pavement.
- (e) Spitting on the pavement is inconsiderate.
- (f) You must not spit on the pavement.

---

**6.15** Miscommunication can result when the hearer has miscalculated the intended illocution. This often forms the basis of humour as in the following rather awful joke where a **complaint** is (deliberately?) misinterpreted as **praise**.

Customer: Waiter! There's a fly in my soup.  
 Waiter: Don't worry, there's no extra charge.

Find examples of jokes with a similar basis.

---

**6.16** Look in a thesaurus for the verbs related to the speech acts of *confession* and *apology*. How many did you find? Were some more negatively 'loaded' than others?

---

**6.17** Following on from **Exercise 6.1**, think of at least five acts that you could perform by using either words or gestures. In the

case of performing the act by gesture, is this ever dependent on speech being used at some point in the event? Think about bidding at an auction, for example. Can you think of any acts that can only be performed by using words?

---

**6.18** In Exercise 6.6 you might have felt that the addition of *hereby* to He admits he was silly sounded slightly less odd than it did with the other non-performative utterances. Can you think of a special situation where He hereby admits he was silly could be considered performative?

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For an annotated version of Austin's original lectures:

Austin, 1975.

For introductions to speech-act theory:

Stubbs, 1983, Chapter 8.

Coulthard, 1985, Chapter 2.

Austin's proposal that speaking can be analysed as action has made a major contribution to pragmatics. His basic analytic framework has stimulated an enormous amount of thinking and research about a previously neglected but very important area of interpersonal meaning. However, some of his ideas, particularly his distinction between performative and constative utterances, have attracted a considerable amount of criticism. See:

Blakemore, 1992, Chapter 6.

Leech, 1983, Chapters 8 and 9.

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## FURTHER READING

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words or gestures. In the

# 7

## MORE ABOUT SPEECH ACTS

We introduce felicity conditions and look at ways of classifying and identifying speech acts.

If you do that, I won't eat my dessert.  
(Matteo Peccei, age 3)

As soon as our son (a champion dessert eater) uttered those words, he looked quite puzzled. He realized that his attempt to 'threaten' his parents had somehow gone horribly wrong, but why? Austin would have said that Matteo's threat was not 'felicitous' because, among other things, a threat should involve an action that is undesirable to the hearer rather than to the speaker. Austin's idea that it is possible to state the necessary conditions for a particular illocution to 'count' was developed further by John Searle (1971). In the next exercise, we will look at some of the types of FELICITY CONDITIONS for a promise.

### Felicity conditions

### EXERCISE

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**7.1** What might make each of these 'promises' infelicitous?

- (a) *Ti prometto di pulire la cucina.* ['I promise you that I'll clean up the kitchen' spoken to someone who the speaker knows does not understand Italian.]
  - (b) I promise that I'll punch you in the nose.
  - (c) I promise that the sun will come up tomorrow.
  - (d) I promise that I started the dishwasher.
  - (e) I promise that you'll make a wonderful dessert.
  - (f) I promise that I'll jump over that skyscraper if I pass my exam.
-

# SPEECH

The problem with (a) is that the hearer cannot understand what the speaker has actually said. The speaker must not be acting nonsensically or pretending to be someone else and the hearer must be capable of understanding the locution. Searle called these **GENERAL CONDITIONS** because they apply to all types of illocutions. The problems with (b) and (c) involve what Searle called the **PREPARATORY CONDITIONS**. In the case of a promise it has to be about something that would not ordinarily happen. And it must be about an act that would be beneficial to the hearer.

The problems with (d) and (e) have to do with the 'content' of the promise. A promise has to be about a future act. In (d) *started* is in the past tense. And, it must be about an act performed by the **speaker**. In (e) *make a wonderful dessert* is an act that will be performed by the hearer. These are called the **CONTENT CONDITIONS**. Different illocutions will have different content conditions. Related to the preparatory conditions is the **SINCERITY CONDITION**. That is, the speaker must be sincere. In the case of a promise, the speaker must genuinely intend to carry out the act mentioned. This is clearly not the case in (f) unless the speaker is Superman.

Of course, not every utterance includes a performative verb like *promise*. Yet we normally manage to infer what the speaker intends. To start tackling this problem, Searle proposed that speech acts could be grouped into general categories based not on performative verbs but on the relationship between 'the words' and 'the world' and on who is responsible for making that relationship work. Within each category there can be a variety of different illocutions, but the members of each group share a similar relationship of 'fit' between the words and the world. We'll start with three very basic categories and some of the different illocutions that would fall into that category:

**REPRESENTATIVES** – Speakers represent external reality by making their words fit the world as they believe it to be (*stating, describing, affirming*).

**COMMISSIVES** – Speakers commit themselves to a future act which will make the world fit their words (*promising, vowing, threatening, offering*).

**DIRECTIVES** – Speakers direct hearers to perform some future act which will make the world fit the speaker's words (*commanding, ordering, requesting, warning, suggesting*).

## Comment

## General conditions

## Preparatory conditions

## Content conditions

## Sincerity condition

## Representatives

## Commissives

## Directives

## EXERCISE

**7.2** In each of the following dialogues, decide whether the second speaker's utterance is a representative, a commissive, or a directive.

- (a) Jane: Coco's sick.  
Steve: I'll take her to the vet.
- (b) Mike: What's the weather like in Dallas?  
Annie: It's raining.

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er that skyscraper if I pass

- (a) I now pronounce you husband and wife.
- (b) I name this ship 'Buster Brown'.
- (c) I sentence you to 10 years in prison.

In (a)–(c) the mere act of uttering the words has changed the world. A couple are now married. A ship is now named 'Buster Brown'. Someone is now a prisoner for 10 years. These kinds of speech acts are quite special in that they can only 'count' if the speaker has the appropriate authority to perform these acts. Searle called these: **DECLARATIONS**. The speaker utters words that in themselves change the world (*naming ships, marriages, sentencing, a referee's 'calls'*).

Table 1 shows the similarities and differences between the speech act categories that we have been discussing.

**Table 1** The relation between 'words' and 'the world'

<i>Speech-act category</i>	<i>Relation between 'the words' and 'the world'</i>	<i>Who is responsible for the relation</i>
Declarations	the words change the world	speaker
Representatives	the words fit the world ('outside' world)	speaker
Expressives	the words fit the world ('psychological' world)	speaker
Rogatives	the words fit the world	hearer
Commissives	the world will fit the words	speaker
Directives	the world will fit the words	hearer

**Comment**

**Declarations**

**EXERCISE**

**7.5** Look at each of these pairs of utterances. Classify the likely speech-act type expressed by the (a) utterance using the categories in **Table 1**. Satisfy yourself that, given the right context, the (b) utterance in each pair could also be used to carry out that type of speech act. Why does the first utterance in each pair seem a more 'direct' way of performing the act?

- 1(a) Go away.
- 1(b) My essay is due tomorrow morning.
- 2(a) Put your jacket on.
- 2(b) Did you put your jacket on?
- 3(a) Be quiet.
- 3(b) I'm very upset that so many of you are talking.
- 4(a) The Democrats won.
- 4(b) Have you heard that the Democrats won?

- (c) Ed: The garage is a mess.  
Faye: Clean it up!
- 

**Comment**

(a)–(c) were fairly easy to classify according to this system. Steve's act was a commissive. Annie's act was a representative. Fay's act was a directive.

---

**EXERCISE** ✎

**7.3** Look at the second speakers' utterances in next the two dialogues. Can these be easily classified using the categories of representative, commissive or directive?

- (d) Carmen: You've thrown away the paper.  
Dave: I'm sorry.  
(e) Patrick: I got a new Nintendo game.  
Virginia: Who from?
- 

**Comment**

Dave's utterance in (d) is a statement like It's raining but it represents the speaker's emotions rather than the 'outside world'. An utterance like this is typically used as an apology. Searle proposed a special category for speech acts that focus primarily on representing the speaker's feelings: **EXPRESSIVES** through which speakers express their feelings by making their words fit their internal psychological world. Expressives can refer to the hearer or to some other aspect of the world, but their focus is the speaker's feeling about it. For example You're very kind or This wine is awful would be classed as expressives (*thanking, apologizing, congratulating, condoling*).

**Expressives**

In a way, Virginia's utterance in (e) is 'directing' Patrick to provide her with information about who gave him the Nintendo game. Searle had originally classed questions like this as directives. Apart from the idea that requesting information from hearers is rather different from requesting that they perform an action, some questions are much more directive than others. Compare Have they appointed a new director? to Can you hand me the pen? Leech (1983) proposed an extra category to deal with requests for information: **ROGATIVES** through which speakers ask for information. In rogatives the hearer rather than the speaker will make the words fit the world (*asking, querying, questioning*).

---

**Rogatives****EXERCISE** ✎

**7.4** How would you describe the relationship between the words and the world in the following utterances? Do any of the categories we have discussed so far capture this relationship?

- 5(a) Have you been fired?  
 5(b) Someone said you got fired.  
 6(a) I'll pay you back.  
 6(b) Authors always pay their debts.

**Comment**

1(a), 2(a) and 3(a) are directives. 4(a) is a representative, 5(a) is a rogative, and 6(a) is a commissive. Note that the speakers did not have to say I order you to go away, I state that the Democrats won, or I ask whether you have been fired. The direct interpretation came from other linguistic features of the utterance which we recognize as typical for that type of speech act. Table 2 summarizes these features.

**Table 2** Typical linguistic expressions of speech acts

<i>Speech-act category</i>	<i>Typical expression</i>	<i>Example</i>
Declarations	declarative structure with speaker as subject and a performative verb in simple present tense	<i>We find the defendant guilty. I resign.</i>
Representatives	declarative structure	<i>Tom's eating grapes. Bill was an accountant.</i>
Expressives	declarative structure with words referring to feelings	<i>I'm sorry to hear that. This beer is disgusting.</i>
Directives	imperative sentence	<i>Sit down! Fasten your seat belts.</i>
Rogatives	interrogative structure	<i>Where did he go? Is she leaving?</i>
Commissives	declarative structure with speaker subject and future time expressed	<i>I'll call you tonight. We're going to turn you in.</i>

**EXERCISE** 

**7.6** This time look at the (b) utterance in each of the pairs in Exercise 7.5. Using Table 2, decide what type of speech act they 'look like'.

**Comment**

1(b) looks like a representative. In fact, Searle would say that it is a representative, but in this context it can also 'do the work' of a directive. In 2(b) we have a rogative functioning as a directive; in 3(b) an expressive functioning as a directive; in 4(b) a rogative functioning

as a representative; in 5(b) a representative functioning as a rogative; and in 6(b) a representative functioning as a commissive.

This led Searle to a further distinction between speech acts. In DIRECT SPEECH ACTS there is a direct relationship between their linguistic structure and the work they are doing. In INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS the speech act is performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act. So, how do hearers know what the 'real' illocutionary force is when presented with an indirect speech act? This is where felicity conditions can be quite useful.

Searle observed that in an indirect speech act, even though the surface form looks like a particular direct speech act, one (or more) of the felicity conditions for that act have been **obviously violated**. At the same time, one (or more) of the felicity conditions for the 'real', underlying, and therefore indirect speech act have been questioned or mentioned by the locution, giving a hint as to the true illocutionary force. If the remaining felicity conditions for the 'real' speech act are fulfilled, then the speaker will interpret the locution as such.

**Direct speech acts**  
**Indirect speech acts**

obts.

a representative, 5(a) is a that the speakers did not state that the Democrats fired. The direct interpretation of the utterance which we h act. Table 2 summarizes

f speech acts

Example

*We find the defendant guilty.  
I resign.*

*Tom's eating grapes.  
Bill was an accountant.*

*I'm sorry to hear that.  
This beer is disgusting.*

*Sit down!  
Fasten your seat belts.*

*Where did he go?  
Is she leaving?*

*I'll call you tonight.  
We're going to turn you in.*

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earle would say that it is a o 'do the work' of a direc- g as a directive; in 3(b) an (b) a rogative functioning

**7.7** Try your hand at writing some felicity conditions for a 'true' or 'felicitous' directive.

Your answers probably looked something like this:

- The speaker must be in a position to direct the hearer to perform the act.
- The directed act must not be something which has already happened or would happen anyway.
- The directed act must be something the hearer is willing or obligated to carry out if asked.
- The directed act must be something which the hearer is capable of carrying out.
- The directed act must be something which is needed by or desirable to the speaker.

 **EXERCISE**

**Comment**

**7.8** Now write two key felicity conditions for a 'felicitous' rogative.

For a rogative:

- The speaker must not already have the information requested.
- The speaker must have reason to believe that the hearer can supply the information.

 **EXERCISE**

**Comment**

**EXERCISE** 

**7.9** A mother is standing by the door as her child starts to go out without his jacket and says: Did you put your jacket on? Using the felicity conditions for directives and rogatives, explain why the mother's utterance would be interpreted as an indirect directive.

**Comment**

Did you put your jacket on? looks superficially like a rogative given its interrogative form, but it violates the key felicity condition that the speaker does not already know the answer to the question (the mother can see that the child does not have his jacket on). On the other hand, the utterance explicitly queries one of the felicity conditions for a directive: the directed act must be something that has not already happened or would happen anyway. Assuming that the remaining felicity conditions for a valid directive are met (look at the remaining felicity conditions for a directive and satisfy yourself that this is the case), the hearer will interpret this as an indirect directive to put on the jacket.

If the child simply replied No I didn't without putting on the jacket, it would normally be interpreted as a deliberate refusal to carry out a directive. Often when hearers receive this kind of indirect directive they respond to the rogative by answering No while simultaneously carrying out the indirect directive.

You may have already observed that, particularly in the case of directives, there is a strong link between politeness and the degree of directness. We will be exploring this issue in the next unit.

**SUMMARY**

- Speech acts can be grouped into general categories which are based on the relationship between 'the words' and 'the world' and on who is responsible for bringing about the relationship.
- Speech acts can also be classified as direct or indirect. In a **direct speech act** there is a direct relationship between its linguistic structure and the work it is doing. In **indirect speech acts** the speech act is performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act.
- **Felicity conditions** are sets of necessary conditions for an illocution to 'count'.
- The true illocutionary force of an indirect speech act can be inferred from the fact that one or more of the felicity conditions of the 'surface' speech act have been obviously violated, while at the same time one or more of the felicity conditions for the indirect speech act have been mentioned or questioned.

 **FURTHER EXERCISES**

**7.10** In Exercises 7.2 and 7.3 you were asked to identify the speech acts of the second speakers using the categories in Table 1. Now go back and do the same thing for the first speakers' utterances.

**7.11** An utterance that looks superficially like a directive because of its imperative form, but is indirectly realizing another type of speech act, is sometimes called a PSEUDO-DIRECTIVE. Label each of the following utterances as direct directive, indirect directive or pseudo-directive. For a pseudo-directive state the true illocutionary force. Give your reasons in each case, making use of the felicity-condition framework.

- (a) Mother to child: Please pick up your clothes.
- (b) Mother to child: You haven't made your bed!
- (c) Speaker has just been thanked: Don't mention it.

**7.12** Using the answer to Exercise 7.9, show how Can you be quiet? would be interpreted as an indirect directive.

**7.13** Apply the direct directive/indirect directive/pseudo-directive analysis used in Exercise 7.11 to the following:

- (a) Burglary victim to police officer in a ransacked house: Officer, look at the mess they've made!
- (b) Mourner to bereaved: Please accept my deepest sympathy.
- (c) Mother to child: How many times have I asked you to clean your room?
- (d) Mother to child: You should clean up your room.
- (e) Waiter to diner: Enjoy your meal.
- (f) Sacked worker to boss: Drop dead!

**7.14** Look again at the utterances in Exercise 7.1. Since we concluded that they were not promises, what were they?

**7.15** Take the example utterances in Table 2 and construct a context where each of these could be used to perform indirectly some other type of speech act.

**7.16** It is possible to write felicity conditions that apply to all the members of a category. For example, all commissives share certain felicity conditions such as they must refer in some way to a future

Pseudo-directive

 **SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES**

 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

act which will be performed by the speaker. However, different illocutions in that category will have special felicity conditions that distinguish them from each other. For example, a threat involves an action undesirable to the hearer, while a promise involves a desirable one. Coulthard (1985) has proposed that it is very difficult to write felicity conditions for expressives in general because they are usually used to perform some other act over and above simply representing the speaker's psychological state. Do you agree?

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**7.17** Try writing a set of felicity conditions for each of the following illocutionary acts.

- (a) thanking
- (b) commanding
- (c) naming a ship
- (d) apologizing
- (e) congratulating
- (f) performing a marriage

You will probably find that, for some of these, the sincerity condition was a bit problematic. For example, does an apology have to be sincere in order to count as an apology? In Parliament an MP says I apologize for calling my honourable friend a liar to avoid being ejected from the House. The mere form of words is enough, even when everyone present knows that the MP is not remotely sorry. Content conditions can also be a problem in some of these. For example, can You're hitched! be substituted for I now pronounce you man and wife?

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**7.18** Leech (1983) proposed that declarations are not really communicative acts at all, but simply the linguistic part of a larger ritual and as such do not really belong in Table 1. Do you agree?

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**7.19** Do we need to give consideration to paralinguistic elements? Can an act of *thanking* be felicitous if spoken with clenched teeth, narrowed eyes, and a rather vicious tone of voice?

---

**7.20** Searle acknowledged that there are several 'grey areas' in his classification system. Using the classifications in Table 1, where would you put *boasting*, *complaining*, *accusing*, *deploring*? What distinguishes *confiding* from *announcing*, both of which would belong to the general class of representatives? Is *advising* a representative or a directive?

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**FURTHER  
READING**

For Searle in the 'original' (quite challenging):

Searle, 1971, 1979.

For a beginner level discussion of Searle's thinking with a short extract from his work:

Yule, 1996.

For alternative ways of classifying speech acts and identifying indirect speech acts:

Labov and Fanshel, 1977.

For how Grice's work on conversational implicature relates to speech-act theory:

Levinson, 1983.

However, different illocutionary conditions that, a threat involves an intention involves a desire, it is very difficult to distinguish because they are all above simply represent you agree?

Directions for each of the

For example, the sincerity conditions an apology have to meet. In Parliament an MP might tell a friend a liar to avoid a loss of words is enough, the MP is not remotely dishonest in some of these. substituted for I now

Directions are not really illocutionary part of a larger illocutionary act. Do you agree?

Paralinguistic elements? Directions with clenched teeth, voice?

Directions several 'grey areas' in illocutionary conditions in **Table 1**, where *complimenting, deploring*? What directions of which would belong to *complimenting* a representative

# 8

## POLITENESS

We look at the importance of politeness in determining how we structure and interpret utterances.

Rude I am in speech and little blessed with the soft phrase  
of peace.

(Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 1, Scene 2)

A child who is not allowed to say anything but 'No, thank  
you' at home, will not mortify his mother in public by  
screaming 'I hate steak, I want ice-cream!'

(Emily Post, *Etiquette*, 1922)

Instancing the rudeness of waiters, Andrew Billen quoted  
one as saying 'I don't know, can you?' in reply to his ques-  
tion, 'Can we order now?'. If Mr. Billen had been taught  
good manners as a child, he would have asked 'May we  
order now?' ... Mr. Billen should learn proper manners  
himself before complaining about the lack of niceness in  
others.

(Letter to the editor of the *Evening Standard*,  
25 November 1998)

We clearly attach great importance to 'speaking politely'. This aspect  
of the communicative process was largely ignored by Austin, Searle  
and Grice. Yet, the need to be polite can often account for why we  
choose to imply rather than assert an idea or why we choose to use  
an indirect directive like Well, I really must get on with my work  
now, rather than a direct directive like Go home.

 EXERCISE

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**8.1** Below are five utterances with an imperative structure. Assume that each one would be spoken by the host to a guest. Rearrange them in order of politeness, starting with the least polite. Think about what made some of these utterances seem more polite than others.

- (a) Take a look at this.
  - (b) Clean up the kitchen floor.
  - (c) Pass the salt.
  - (d) Have some more cake.
  - (e) Peel these potatoes.
- 

Most people rank the utterances like this:

- (b) Clean up the kitchen floor.
- (e) Peel these potatoes.
- (c) Pass the salt.
- (a) Take a look at this.
- (d) Have some more cake.

In each of these cases, the speaker is requesting some sort of action from the hearer. What you probably noticed is that the smaller the 'cost' of the action for the hearer, the more polite the speaker sounds. In fact, by the time we get to *Have some more cake*, there is a positive benefit to the hearer and we interpret this as an offer rather than a request. Leech (1983) proposed a **TACT MAXIM** which reflects this tendency. It can be summarized as: **Minimize the cost to other; maximize the benefit to other.**

**Comment****Tact maxim** EXERCISE

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**8.2** Here are three possible requests for the same action. Again, assume that each one would be spoken by the host to a guest and rearrange them in order of politeness, starting with the least polite. Think about what made some of these utterances seem more polite than others.

- (a) Could I possibly ask you to set the table?
  - (b) Set the table.
  - (c) Can you set the table?
- 

Most people rank the utterances like this:

- (b) Set the table.
- (c) Can you set the table?
- (a) Could I possibly ask you to set the table?

**Comment**

What you probably noticed is that as these requests become more polite, they also become more indirect. Utterance (b) uses an imperative structure making it a direct directive. Utterance (c) uses an interrogative structure, phrasing a directive as a rogative, (a question about the hearer's ability to carry out the action). Utterance (a) is even more indirect since the speaker is technically asking permission to make a request. What is happening here is that, as the request becomes more indirect, the speaker is making it less and less obvious that she expects the hearer to comply. On the surface, at least, this provides greater freedom for the hearer to refuse the request. Leech also observed that the higher the cost of the directed act, the more likely it is for the speaker to use an indirect form. Most people judge *Can you pass the salt?* as more polite than *Can you clean up the kitchen floor?* So far we have been discussing directives and commissives. But the relationship between politeness and indirectness can also apply to representatives.

### EXERCISE

**8.3** In each of the following dialogues, there are three alternative responses for the second speaker. Put them in increasing order of politeness.

- 1 Meridyth: Well, I've done it. I've dyed my hair blonde.  
Ed: (a) You look beautiful.  
(b) You look awful.  
(c) You look amazing.
- 2 Tom: Do you like the wine I picked out?  
Gabriela: (a) It's Italian, isn't it?  
(b) Yes, I do.  
(c) Not really.
- 3 Jean: What did the students say about my teaching?  
Linda: (a) Let's hope none of them are lawyers.  
(b) Some students were very positive.  
(c) Pretty bad.

### Comment

Most people rank the responses like this:

- 1(b) You look awful.
- 1(c) You look amazing.
- 1(a) You look beautiful.
- 2(c) Not really.
- 2(a) It's Italian, isn't it?
- 2(b) Yes, I do.
- 3(c) Pretty bad.
- 3(a) Let's hope none of them are lawyers.
- 3(b) Some students were very positive.