9 Semantics

The words *Fire Department* make it sound like they're the ones who are starting fires, doesn't it? It should be called the "Extinguishing Department." We don't call the police the "Crime Department." Also, the "Bomb Squad" sounds like a terrorist gang. The same is true of *wrinkle cream*. Doesn't it sound like it causes wrinkles? And why would a doctor prescribe pain pills? I already *have* pain! I need relief pills!

Carlin (1997)

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker (like George Carlin) might want them to mean on a particular occasion. This approach is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids trying to account for subjective or local meaning. Doing semantics is attempting to spell out what it is we all know when we behave as if we share knowledge of the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a sentence in a language.

Meaning

While semantics is the study of meaning in language, there is more interest in certain aspects of meaning than in others. We have already ruled out special meanings that one individual might attach to words. We can go further and make a broad distinction between **conceptual meaning** and **associative meaning**. Conceptual meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. It is the type of meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. Some of the basic components of a word like *needle* in English might include "thin, sharp, steel instrument." These components would be part of the conceptual meaning of *needle*. However, different people might have different associations or connotations attached to a word like *needle*. They might associate it with "pain," or "illness," or "blood," or "drugs," or "thread," or "knitting," or "hard to find" (especially in a haystack), and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These types of associations are not treated as part of the word's conceptual meaning.

In a similar way, some people may associate the expression *low-calorie*, when used to describe a product, with "healthy," but this is not part of the basic conceptual meaning of the expression (i.e. "producing a small amount of heat or energy"). Poets, song-writers, novelists, literary critics, advertisers and lovers may all be interested in how words can evoke certain aspects of associative meaning, but in linguistic semantics we're more concerned with trying to analyze conceptual meaning.

Semantic features

One way in which the study of basic conceptual meaning might be helpful would be as a means of accounting for the "oddness" we experience when we read sentences such as the following:

The hamburger ate the boy.
The table listens to the radio.
The horse is reading the newspaper.

We should first note that the oddness of these sentences does not derive from their syntactic structure. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences (as presented in Chapter 8), we have well-formed structures.

	NP	V	NP
	The hamburger	*ate*	*the boy*

This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd. Since the sentence *The boy ate the hamburger* is perfectly acceptable, we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The components of the conceptual meaning of the noun *hamburger* must be significantly different from those of the noun *boy*, thereby preventing one, and not the other, from being used as the subject of the verb *ate*. The kind of noun that can be the subject of the verb *ate* must denote an entity that is capable of "eating." The noun *hamburger* does not have this property and the noun *boy* does.

We can make this observation more generally applicable by trying to determine the crucial element or feature of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb *ate*. Such an element may be as general as "animate being." We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as either having (+) or not having (−) that particular feature. So, the feature that the noun *boy* has is "+animate" (= denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun *hamburger* has is "−animate" (= does not denote an animate being).

This simple example is an illustration of a procedure for analyzing meaning in terms of **semantic features**. Features such as "+animate, −animate," "+human, −human," "+female, −female," for example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. If we had to provide the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of a set of English words such as *table, horse, boy, man, girl, woman*, we could begin with the following diagram.

	table	horse	boy	man	girl	woman
animate	−	+	+	+	+	+
human	−	−	+	+	+	+
female	−	−	−	−	+	+
adult	−	+	−	+	−	+

From a feature analysis like this, we can say that at least part of the meaning of the word *girl* in English involves the elements [+human, +female, −adult]. We can also characterize the feature that is crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of a particular verb, supplementing the syntactic analysis with semantic features.

The _____ is reading the newspaper.

     N [+human]

This approach would give us the ability to predict which nouns make this sentence semantically odd. Some examples would be *table, horse* and *hamburger*, because none of them have the required feature [+human].

The approach just outlined is a start on analyzing the conceptual components of word meaning, but it is not without problems. For many words in a language it may not be as easy to come up with neat components of meaning. If we try to think of the components or features we would use to differentiate the nouns *advice*, *threat* and *warning*, for example, we may not be very successful. Part of the problem seems to be that the approach involves a view of words in a language as some sort of "containers" that carry meaning components. There is clearly more to the meaning of words than these basic types of features.

Semantic roles

Instead of thinking of words as "containers" of meaning, we can look at the "roles" they fulfill within the situation described by a sentence. If the situation is a simple event, as in *The boy kicked the ball*, then the verb describes an action (*kick*). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in the action. We can identify a small number of **semantic roles** (also called "thematic roles") for these noun phrases.

Agent and theme

In our example sentence, one role is taken by the noun phrase *The boy* as "the entity that performs the action," technically known as the **agent**. Another role is taken by *the ball* as "the entity that is involved in or affected by the action," which is called the **theme** (or sometimes the "patient"). The theme can also be an entity (*The ball*) that is simply being described (i.e. not performing an action), as in *The ball was red*.

Agents and themes are the most common semantic roles. Although agents are typically human (*The boy*), they can also be non-human entities that cause actions, as in noun phrases denoting a natural force (*The wind*), a machine (*A car*), or a creature (*The dog*), all of which affect *the ball* as theme.

The boy kicked the ball.
The wind blew the ball away.
A car ran over the ball.
The dog caught the ball.

The theme is typically non-human, but can be human (*the boy*), as in *The dog chased the boy*. In fact, the same physical entity can appear in two different semantic roles in a sentence, as in *The boy cut himself*. Here *The boy* is agent and *himself* is theme.

Instrument and experiencer

If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the role of **instrument**. In the sentences *The boy cut the rope with an old razor* and *He drew the picture with a crayon*, the noun phrases *an old razor* and *a crayon* are being used in the semantic role of instrument.

When a noun phrase is used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state, it fills the semantic role of **experiencer**. If we *see*, *know* or *enjoy* something, we're not really performing an action (hence we are not agents). We are in the role of experiencer. In the sentence *The boy feels sad*, the experiencer (*The boy*) is the only semantic role. In the question, *Did you hear that noise?*, the experiencer is *you* and the theme is *that noise*.

Location, source and goal

A number of other semantic roles designate where an entity is in the description of an event. Where an entity is (*on the table, in the room*) fills the role of **location**. Where the entity moves from is the **source** (*from Chicago*) and where it moves to is the **goal** (*to New Orleans*), as in *We drove from Chicago to New Orleans*. When we talk about transferring money *from savings to checking*, the source is *savings* and the goal is *checking*.

All these semantic roles are illustrated in the following scenario. Note that a single entity (e.g. *George*) can appear in several different semantic roles.

Mary   saw   a fly   on the wall.
EXPERIENCER   THEME   LOCATION

She   borrowed   a magazine   from George.
AGENT   THEME   SOURCE

She   squashed   the bug   with the magazine.
AGENT   THEME   INSTRUMENT

She   handed   the magazine   back to George.
AGENT   THEME   GOAL

"Gee thanks," said George.
                              AGENT

Lexical relations

Not only can words be treated as "containers" of meaning, or as fulfilling "roles" in events, they can also have "relationships" with each other. In everyday talk, we often

explain the meanings of words in terms of their relationships. If we're asked the meaning of the word *conceal*, for example, we might simply say, "It's the same as *hide*," or give the meaning of *shallow* as "the opposite of *deep*," or the meaning of *daffodil* as "a kind of *flower*." In doing so, we are characterizing the meaning of each word, not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. This approach is used in the semantic description of language and treated as the analysis of **lexical relations**. The lexical relations we have just exemplified are synonymy (*conceal/hide*), antonymy (*shallow/deep*) and hyponymy (*daffodil/flower*).

Synonymy

Two or more words with very closely related meanings are called **synonyms**. They can often, though not always, be substituted for each other in sentences. In the appropriate circumstances, we can say, *What was his answer?* or *What was his reply?* with much the same meaning. Other common examples of synonyms are the pairs: *almost/nearly, big/large, broad/wide, buy/purchase, cab/taxi, car/automobile, couch/sofa, freedom/liberty*.

We should keep in mind that the idea of "sameness" of meaning used in discussing synonymy is not necessarily "total sameness." There are many occasions when one word is appropriate in a sentence, but its synonym would be odd. For example, whereas the word *answer* fits in the sentence *Sandy had only one answer correct on the test*, the word *reply* would sound odd. Synonymous forms may also differ in terms of formal versus informal uses. The sentence *My father purchased a large automobile* has virtually the same meaning as *My dad bought a big car*, with four synonymous replacements, but the second version sounds much more casual or informal than the first.

Antonymy

Two forms with opposite meanings are called **antonyms**. Some common examples are the pairs: *alive/dead, big/small, fast/slow, happy/sad, hot/cold, long/short, male/female, married/single, old/new, rich/poor, true/false*.

Antonyms are usually divided into two main types, "gradable" (opposites along a scale) and "non-gradable" (direct opposites). **Gradable antonyms**, such as the pair *big/small*, can be used in comparative constructions like *I'm bigger than you* and *A pony is smaller than a horse*. Also, the negative of one member of a gradable pair does not necessarily imply the other. For example, the sentence *My car isn't old*, doesn't necessarily mean *My car is new*.

With **non-gradable antonyms** (also called "complementary pairs"), comparative constructions are not normally used. We don't typically describe someone as *deader* or *more dead* than another. Also, the negative of one member of a non-gradable pair does imply the other member. That is, *My grandparents aren't alive* does indeed mean *My grandparents are dead*. Other non-gradable antonyms in the earlier list are the pairs: *male/female, married/single* and *true/false*.

Although we can use the "negative test" to identify non-gradable antonyms in a language, we usually avoid describing one member of an antonymous pair as the negative of the other. For example, while *undress* can be treated as the opposite of *dress*, it doesn't mean "not dress." It actually means "do the reverse of dress." Antonyms of this type are called **reversives**. Other common examples are *enter/exit, pack/unpack, lengthen/shorten, raise/lower, tie/untie*.

Hyponymy

When the meaning of one form is included in the meaning of another, the relationship is described as **hyponymy**. Examples are the pairs: *animal/dog, dog/poodle, vegetable/carrot, flower/rose, tree/banyan*. The concept of "inclusion" involved in this relationship is the idea that if an object is a *rose*, then it is necessarily a *flower*, so the meaning of *flower* is included in the meaning of *rose*. Or, *rose* is a hyponym of *flower*.

When we consider hyponymous connections, we are essentially looking at the meaning of words in some type of hierarchical relationship. We can represent the relationships between a set of words such as *animal, ant, asp, banyan, carrot,*
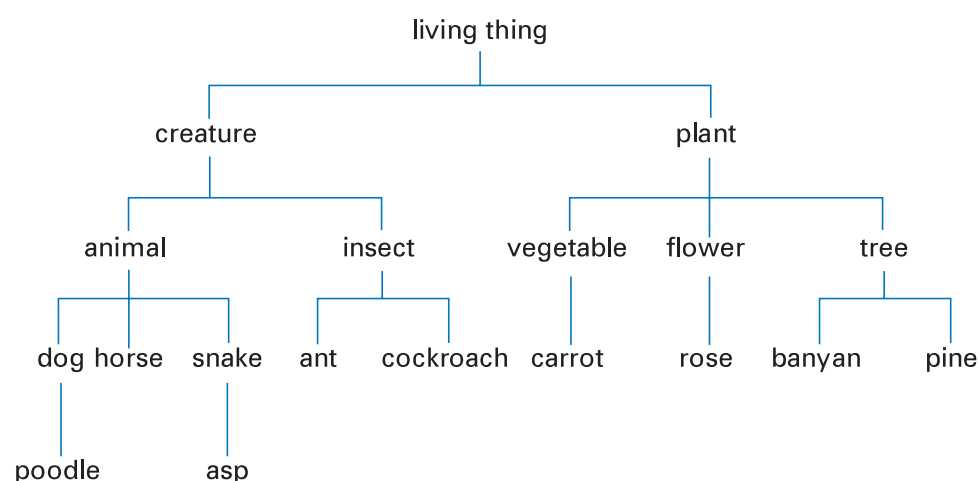

Figure 9.1

cockroach, creature, dog, flower, horse, insect, living thing, pine, plant, poodle, rose, snake, tree and *vegetable* as a hierarchical diagram.

Looking at the diagram, we can say that "*horse* is a hyponym of *animal*" or "*cockroach* is a hyponym of *insect*." In these two examples, *animal* and *insect* are called the **superordinate** (= higher-level) terms. We can also say that two or more words that share the same superordinate term are **co-hyponyms**. So, *dog* and *horse* are co-hyponyms and the superordinate term is *animal*.

The relation of hyponymy captures the concept of "is a kind of," as when we give the meaning of a word by saying, "an *asp* is a kind of *snake.*" Sometimes the only thing we know about the meaning of a word is that it is a hyponym of another term. That is, we may know nothing more about the meaning of the word *asp* other than that it is a kind of *snake* or that *banyan* is a kind of *tree*.

It is worth emphasizing that it is not only words for "things" that are hyponyms. Words such as *punch*, *shoot* and *stab*, describing "actions," can all be treated as co-hyponyms of the superordinate term *injure*.

Prototypes

While the words *canary*, *cormorant*, *dove*, *duck*, *flamingo*, *parrot*, *pelican* and *robin* are all equally co-hyponyms of the superordinate *bird*, they are not all considered to be equally good examples of the category "bird." According to some researchers, the most characteristic instance of the category "bird" is *robin*. The idea of "the characteristic instance" of a category is known as the **prototype**. The concept of a prototype helps explain the meaning of certain words, like *bird*, not in terms of component features (e.g. "has feathers," "has wings"), but in terms of resemblance to the clearest example. Thus, even native speakers of English might wonder if *ostrich* or *penguin* should be hyponyms of *bird* (technically they are), but have no trouble deciding about *sparrow* or *pigeon*. These last two are much closer to the prototype.

Given the category label *furniture*, we are quick to recognize *chair* as a better example than *bench* or *stool*. Given *clothing*, people recognize *shirts* quicker than *shoes*, and given *vegetable*, they accept *carrot* before *potato* or *tomato*. It is clear that there is some general pattern to the categorization process involved in prototypes and that it determines our interpretation of word meaning. However, this is one area where individual experience can lead to substantial variation in interpretation and people may disagree over the categorization of a word like *avocado* or *tomato* as fruit or vegetable. These words seem to be treated as co-hyponyms of both *fruit* and *vegetable* in different contexts.

Homophones and homonyms

When two or more different (written) forms have the same pronunciation, they are described as **homophones**. Common examples are *bare/bear*, *meat/meet*, *flour/flower*, *pail/pale*, *right/write*, *sew/so* and *to/too/two*.

We use the term **homonyms** when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings, as in these examples:

bank (of a river) – *bank* (financial institution)
bat (flying creature) – *bat* (used in sports)
mole (on skin) – *mole* (small animal)
pupil (at school) – *pupil* (in the eye)
race (contest of speed) – *race* (ethnic group)

The temptation is to think that the two types of *bank* must be related in meaning. They are not. Homonyms are words that have separate histories and meanings, but have accidentally come to have exactly the same form.

Polysemy

When we encounter two or more words with the same form and related meanings, we have what is technically known as **polysemy**. Polysemy can be defined as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings that are all related by extension. Examples are the word *head*, used to refer to the object on top of your body, froth on top of a glass of beer, person at the top of a company or department, and many other things. Other examples of polysemy are *foot* (of person, of bed, of mountain) or *run* (person does, water does, colors do).

If we aren't sure whether different uses of a single word are examples of homonymy or polysemy, we can check in a dictionary. If the word has multiple meanings (i.e. it's polysemous), then there will be a single entry, with a numbered list of the different meanings of that word. If two words are treated as homonyms, they will typically have two separate entries. In most dictionaries, *bank*, *mail*, *mole* and *sole* are clearly treated as homonyms whereas *face*, *foot*, *get*, *head* and *run* are treated as examples of polysemy.

Of course, it is possible for two forms to be distinguished via homonymy and for one of the forms also to have various uses via polysemy. The words *date* (= a thing we can eat) and *date* (= a point in time) are homonyms. However, the "point in time" kind of *date* is polysemous in terms of a particular day and month (= on a letter), an arranged meeting time (= an appointment), a social meeting (= with someone we like), and even a person (= that person we like). So the question *How was your date?* could have several different interpretations.

Word play

These last three lexical relations are the basis of a lot of word play, usually for humorous effect. In the nursery rhyme *Mary had a little lamb*, we think of a small animal, but in the comic version *Mary had a little lamb, some rice and vegetables*, we think of a small amount of meat. The polysemy of *lamb* allows the two interpretations. We make sense of the riddle *Why are trees often mistaken for dogs?* by recognizing the homonymy in the answer: *Because of their bark*. And if you are asked the following question: *Why is 6 afraid of 7?*, you can understand why the answer is funny (*Because 789*) by identifying the homophones.

Metonymy

The relatedness of meaning found in polysemy is essentially based on similarity. The *head* of a company is similar to the *head* of a person on top of and controlling the body. There is another type of relationship between words, based simply on a close connection in everyday experience. That close connection can be based on a container–contents relation (*bottle/water, can/juice*), a whole–part relation (*car/wheels, house/roof*) or a representative–symbol relationship (*king/crown, the President/the White House*). Using one of these words to refer to the other is an example of **metonymy**.

It is our familiarity with metonymy that makes it possible for us to understand *He drank the whole bottle*, although it sounds absurd literally (i.e. he drank the liquid, not the glass object). We also accept *The White House has announced …* or *Downing Street protested …* without being puzzled that buildings appear to be talking. We use met-onymy when we talk about *filling up the car, answering the door, boiling a kettle, giving someone a hand*, or *needing some wheels*.

Many examples of metonymy are highly conventionalized and easy to interpret. However, other examples depend on an ability to infer what the speaker has in mind. The metonymy in *Get your butt over here* is easier to understand if you are used to male talk in the United States, *The strings are too quiet* if you're familiar with orchestral music, and *I prefer cable* if you have a choice in how you receive television programs (in the USA). Making sense of such expressions often depends on context, background knowledge and inference. These are all topics we'll explore in the next chapter.

Collocation

One final aspect of our knowledge of words has nothing to do with any of the factors considered so far. We know which words tend to occur with other words. If you ask a

thousand people what they think of when you say *hammer*, more than half will say *nail*. If you say *table*, they'll mostly say *chair*, and *butter* elicits *bread*, *needle* elicits *thread* and *salt* elicits *pepper*. One way we seem to organize our knowledge of words is simply on the basis of **collocation**, or frequently occurring together.

In recent years, the study of which words occur together and their frequency of co-occurrence has received a lot more attention in **corpus linguistics**. A corpus is a large collection of texts, spoken or written, typically stored as a database in a computer. Those doing corpus linguistics can then use the database to find out how often specific words or phrases occur and what types of collocations are most common.

One investigation looked at 84 occurrences of the phrase *true feelings* in a corpus (only a small sample is shown here). After looking at the types of verbs (e.g. *deny*, *try to communicate*) used with this phrase, the investigator noted that "English speakers use the phrase with *true feelings* when they want to give the meaning of reluctance to express deeply felt emotions" (Sinclair, 2003: 148).

(1)   more accustomed to denying our *true feelings*, avoiding reflection and self- …
(2)   We try to communicate our *true feelings* to those around us, and we are …
(3)   the ability to express our *true feelings* and creativity because we are …
(4)   we appease others, deny our *true feelings*, and conform, I suspected the …
(5)   more of us in there, of our *true feelings*, rather than just ranting on …

This type of research provides more evidence that our understanding of what words and phrases mean is tied to the contexts in which they are typically used. We will look at other aspects of the role of context in the next chapter.

Study questions

1 How is the term "prototype" used in semantics?
2 Using semantic features, how would you explain the oddness of these sentences?
   (a) *The television drank my water*.
   (b) *His dog writes poetry*.
3 Identify the semantic roles of the seven noun phrases in this sentence.

   With her new golf club, Anne Marshall whacked the ball from the woods to the grassy area near the hole and she suddenly felt invincible.

4 What is the basic lexical relation between each pair of words listed here?

   (a) *damp/moist*   (c) *furniture/table*   (e) *move/run*
   (b) *deep/shallow*   (d) *married/single*   (f) *peace/piece*

5 Which of the following opposites are gradable, non-gradable, or reversive?

   (a) *absent/present*   (c) *fail/pass*   (e) *fill it/empty it*
   (b) *appear/disappear*   (d) *fair/unfair*   (f) *high/low*

6 Are these underlined words best described as examples of polysemy or metonymy?
   (a) *The pen is mightier than the sword*.
   (b) *I had to park on the shoulder of the road.*
   (c) *Yes, I love those. I ate a whole box on Sunday!*
   (d) *The bookstore has some new titles in linguistics.*
   (e) *Computer chips created an important new technology.*
   (f) *I'm going to sue your ass!*

Tasks

A What is the connection between an English doctor called Peter Mark Roget and the study of lexical relations?
B In this chapter, we discussed metonymy, but not metaphor. What is the difference between these two ways of using words?
C The adjective pairs listed here are antonyms with a marked and unmarked member in each pair. Can you list the unmarked members and explain your choices?

   big/small, empty/full, expensive/inexpensive, fast/slow, happy/unhappy, heavy/ light, old/young, possible/impossible, short/tall, strong/weak

D   Which of these pairs of words are converses (also known as reciprocal antonyms)?

above/below, asleep/awake, brother/sister, buy/sell, doctor/patient, dry/wet, enter/exit, follow/precede, husband/wife, older/younger, true/false

E   Another less common relation between word meanings is known as transferred epithet or hypallage. Why do we need to talk about this special type of meaning relation in the analysis of the meaning of the phrases listed here? Can you think of any other similar examples?

a quiet cup of coffee, a sleepless night, a nude photo, one of my clever days

F   We can *pour water into a glass* and we can *fill a glass with water*, but we can't **fill water into a glass* or **pour a glass with water*. Why not?

(i)   By focusing on the meaning of the verbs and their themes ("the affected objects"), try to find a semantic reason why some of the following sentences are ungrammatical.
(1)   (a)   *We loaded furniture into the van.*
(b)   *We loaded the van with furniture.*
(2)   (a)   *They sprayed paint onto the wall.*
(b)   *They sprayed the wall with paint.*
(3)   (a)   *I poured coffee into the cup.*
(b)   **I poured the cup with coffee.*
(4)   (a)   **She filled tissues into her pocket.*
(b)   *She filled her pocket with tissues.*

(ii)   Which of the following verbs can be used in both of the (a) and (b) structures illustrated in examples (1–4): *attach, cram, glue, ladle, pack, paste, splash, spread*?

Discussion topics/projects

I   One way to analyze the semantic structure of sentences is to start with the verb as the central element and define the semantic roles required by that verb. (This is sometimes called "theta assignment.") For example, a verb like *kill* requires an agent and a theme, as in *The cat* [agent] *killed the mouse* [theme]. A verb like *give* requires an agent, a theme and a goal, as in *The girl* [agent] *gave the flowers* [theme] *to her mother* [goal]. We can represent these observations in the following way:

KILL [Agent _____ Theme]

GIVE [Agent _____ Theme, Goal]

How would you define the set of semantic roles for the following verbs, using the format illustrated? Are there required roles and optional roles?

break, build, die, eat, fear, kiss, like, occupy, offer, open, put, receive, send, sneeze, steal, taste, teach, understand, want, write

(For background reading, see chapter 10 of Brinton, 2000.)

II The words in the following list are all related in terms of the superordinate form *tableware*. How would you go about determining what the prototype item of "tableware" must be? Is a hierarchical diagram illustrating hyponymous relations useful? Would it be helpful to list some (or all) of the words beside a scale from 5 (= "excellent example of tableware") to 1 (= "not really an example of tableware") and ask people to indicate their choices on the scale? Do you think that the word with the highest score would indicate the prototype?

bowl	*flatware*	*ladle*	*soup spoon*
crockery	*fork*	*mug*	*spoon*
cup	*glass*	*plate*	*teaspoon*
cutlery	*glassware*	*platter*	*tumbler*
dish	*knife*	*saucer*	*wineglass*

(For background reading, see chapter 1 of Ungerer and Schmid, 2006.)

Further reading

Basic treatments

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    Pearson

10 Pragmatics

In the late 1960s, two elderly American tourists who had been touring Scotland reported that, in their travels, they had come to a Scottish town in which there was a great ruined cathedral. As they stood in the ruins, they saw a small boy and they asked him when the cathedral had been so badly damaged. He replied *in the war*. Their immediate interpretation, in the 1960s, was that he must be referring to the Second World War which had ended only twenty years earlier. But then they thought that the ruins looked as if they had been in their dilapidated state for much longer than that, so they asked the boy which war he meant. He replied *the war with the English*, which, they eventually discovered, had formally ended in 1745.

Brown (1998)

In the previous chapter, we focused on conceptual meaning and the relationships between words. There are other aspects of meaning that depend more on context and the communicative intentions of speakers. In Gill Brown's story, the American tourists and the Scottish boy seem to be using the word *war* with essentially the same basic meaning. However, the boy was using the word to refer to something the tourists didn't expect, hence the initial misunderstanding. Communication clearly depends on not only recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance, but recognizing what speakers mean by their utterances. The study of what speakers mean, or "speaker meaning," is called **pragmatics**.

Pragmatics

In many ways, pragmatics is the study of "invisible" meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers (or writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provides us with some insights into how more is always being communicated than is said.

Driving by a parking garage, you may see a large sign like the one in the picture. You read the sign, knowing what each of the words means and what the sign as a whole means. However, you don't normally think that the sign is advertising a place where you can park your "heated attendant." (You take an attendant, you heat him/her up, and this is where you can park him/her.) Alternatively, the sign may indicate a place where parking will be carried out by attendants who have been heated.

The words in the sign may allow these interpretations, but we would normally understand that we can park a car in this place, that it's a heated area, and that there
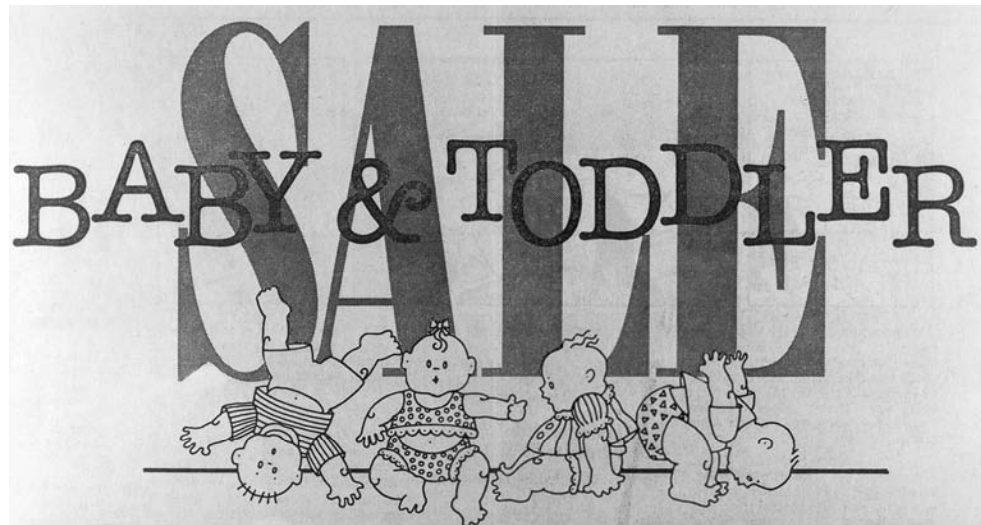

Figure 10.1

Figure 10.2

will be an attendant to look after the car. So, how do we decide that the sign means this when the sign doesn't even have the word *car* on it? We must use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the "meaning" of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended to communicate.

In the other picture, assuming things are normal and this store has not gone into the business of selling young children, we can recognize an advertisement for a sale of clothes for those babies and toddlers. The word *clothes* doesn't appear in the message, but we can bring that idea to our interpretation of the message as we work out what the advertiser intended us to understand. We are actively involved in creating an interpretation of what we read and hear.

Context

In our discussion of the last two examples, we emphasized the influence of context. There are different kinds of context. One kind is described as **linguistic context**, also known as **co-text**. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. The surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word probably means. In the last chapter, we identified the word *bank* as a homonym, a single form with more than one meaning. How do we usually know which meaning is intended in a particular sentence? We normally do so on the basis of linguistic context.

If the word *bank* is used in a sentence together with words like *steep* or *overgrown*, we have no problem deciding which type of *bank* is meant. Or, if we hear someone say that she has to *get to the bank to withdraw some cash*, we know from this linguistic context which type of *bank* is intended.

More generally, we know how to interpret words on the basis of **physical context**. If we see the word *BANK* on the wall of a building in a city, the physical location will influence our interpretation. While this may seem rather obvious, we should keep in mind that it is not the actual physical situation "out there" that constitutes "the context" for interpreting words or sentences. The relevant context is our mental representation of those aspects of what is physically out there that we use in arriving at an interpretation. Our understanding of much of what we read and hear is tied to this processing of aspects of the physical context, particularly the time and place, in which we encounter linguistic expressions.

Deixis

There are some very common words in our language that can't be interpreted at all if we don't know the context, especially the physical context of the speaker. These are words such as *here* and *there*, *this* or *that*, *now* and *then*, *yesterday*, *today* or *tomorrow*, as well as pronouns such as *you*, *me*, *she*, *him*, *it*, *them*. Some sentences of English are virtually impossible to understand if we don't know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. For example: *You'll have to bring it back tomorrow because she isn't here today*.

Out of context, this sentence is really vague. It contains a large number of expressions (*you*, *it*, *tomorrow*, *she*, *here*, *today*) that rely on knowledge of the immediate physical context for their interpretation (i.e. that the delivery driver will have to return on February 15 to 660 College Drive with the long box labeled "flowers, handle with care" addressed to Lisa Landry). Expressions such as *tomorrow* and *here* are obvious examples of bits of language that we can only understand in terms of the speaker's intended meaning. They are technically known as **deictic** (/daɪktɪk/) **expressions**, from the Greek word **deixis**, which means "pointing" via language.

We use deixis to point to things (*it*, *this*, *these boxes*) and people (*him*, *them*, *those idiots*), sometimes called **person deixis**. Words and phrases used to point to a location (*here*, *there*, *near that*) are examples of **spatial deixis**, and those used to point to a time (*now*, *then*, *last week*) are examples of **temporal deixis**.

All these deictic expressions have to be interpreted in terms of which person, place or time the speaker has in mind. We make a broad distinction between what is marked as close to the speaker (*this*, *here*, *now*) and what is distant (*that*, *there*, *then*). We can

also indicate whether movement is away from the speaker's location (*go*) or toward the speaker's location (*come*). If you're looking for someone and she appears, moving toward you, you can say *Here she comes!*. If, however, she is moving away from you in the distance, you're more likely to say *There she goes!*. The same deictic effect explains the different situations in which you would tell someone to *Go to bed* versus *Come to bed*.

People can actually use deixis to have some fun. The bar owner who puts up a big sign that reads *Free Beer Tomorrow* (to get you to return to the bar) can always claim that you are just one day too early for the free drink.

Reference

In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don't refer to anything. People refer. We have to define **reference** as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns (*Chomsky*, *Jennifer*, *Whiskas*), other nouns in phrases (*a writer*, *my friend*, *the cat*) or pronouns (*he*, *she*, *it*). We sometimes assume that these words identify someone or something uniquely, but it is more accurate to say that, for each word or phrase, there is a "range of reference." The words *Jennifer* or *friend* or *she* can be used to refer to many entities in the world. As we observed earlier, an expression such as *the war* doesn't directly identify anything by itself, because its reference depends on who is using it.

We can also refer to things when we're not sure what to call them. We can use expressions such as *the blue thing* and *that icky stuff* and we can even invent names. For instance, there was a man who always drove his motorcycle fast and loud through my neighborhood and was locally referred to as *Mr. Kawasaki*. In this case, a brand name for a motorcycle is being used to refer to a person.

Inference

As in the "Mr. Kawasaki" example, a successful act of reference depends more on the listener's ability to recognize what we mean than on the listener's "dictionary" knowledge of a word we use. For example, in a restaurant, one waiter can ask another, *Where's the spinach salad sitting?* and receive the reply, *He's sitting by the door*. If you're studying linguistics, you might ask someone, *Can I look at your Chomsky?* and get the response, *Sure, it's on the shelf over there*. These examples make it clear that we can use names associated with things (*salad*) to refer to people, and use names of

people (*Chomsky*) to refer to things. The key process here is called **inference**. An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant. In the last example, the listener has to operate with the inference: "if X is the name of the writer of a book, then X can be used to identify a copy of a book by that writer." Similar types of inferences are necessary to understand someone who says that *Picasso is in the museum* or *We saw Shakespeare in London* or *Jennifer is wearing Calvin Klein*.

Anaphora

We usually make a distinction between introducing new referents (*a puppy*) and referring back to them (*the puppy, it*).

*We saw a funny home video about a boy washing **a puppy** in a small bath.*
***The puppy** started struggling and shaking and the boy got really wet.*
*When he let go, **it** jumped out of the bath and ran away.*

In this type of referential relationship, the second (or subsequent) referring expression is an example of **anaphora** ("referring back"). The first mention is called the **antecedent**. So, in our example, *a boy*, *a puppy* and *a small bath* are antecedents and *The puppy*, *the boy*, *he*, *it* and *the bath* are anaphoric expressions.

Anaphora can be defined as subsequent reference to an already introduced entity. Mostly we use anaphora in texts to maintain reference. The connection between an antecedent and an anaphoric expression is created by use of a pronoun (*it*), or a phrase with *the* plus the antecedent noun (*the puppy*), or another noun that is related to the antecedent in some way (***The little dog** ran out of the room*). The connection between antecedents and anaphoric expressions is often based on inference, as in these examples.

*We found **a house** to rent, but **the kitchen** was very small.*
*I caught **a bus** and asked **the driver** if it went near the downtown area.*

In the first example, we must make an inference like "if X is a house, then X has a kitchen" in order to interpret the connection between antecedent *a house* and anaphoric expression *the kitchen*. In the second example, we must make an inference like "if X is a bus, then X has a driver" in order to make the connection between *a bus* and *the driver*.

We have used the term "inference" here to describe what the listener (or reader) does. When we talk about an assumption made by the speaker (or writer), we usually talk about a "presupposition."

Presupposition

When we use a referring expression like *this, he* or *Shakespeare*, we usually assume that our listeners can recognize which referent is intended. In a more general way, we design our linguistic messages on the basis of large-scale assumptions about what our listeners already know. Some of these assumptions may be mistaken, of course, but mostly they're appropriate. What a speaker (or writer) assumes is true or known by a listener (or reader) can be described as a **presupposition**.

If someone tells you *Your brother is waiting outside*, there is an obvious presupposition that you have a brother. If you are asked *Why did you arrive late?*, there is a presupposition that you did arrive late. And if you are asked the question *When did you stop smoking?*, there are at least two presuppositions involved. In asking this question, the speaker presupposes that you used to smoke and that you no longer do so. Questions like this, with built-in presuppositions, are very useful devices for interrogators or trial lawyers. If the defendant is asked by the prosecutor, *Okay, Mr. Buckingham, how fast were you going when you ran the red light?*, there is a presupposition that Mr. Buckingham did in fact run the red light. If he simply answers the *How fast* part of the question, by giving a speed, he is behaving as if the presupposition is correct.

One of the tests used to check for the presuppositions underlying sentences involves negating a sentence with a particular presupposition and checking if the presupposition remains true. Whether you say *My car is a wreck* or the negative version *My car is not a wreck*, the underlying presupposition (*I have a car*) remains true despite the fact that the two sentences have opposite meanings. This is called the "constancy under negation" test for identifying a presupposition. If someone says, *I used to regret marrying him, but I don't regret marrying him now*, the presupposition (*I married him*) remains constant even though the verb *regret* changes from affirmative to negative.

Speech acts

We have been considering ways in which we interpret the meaning of an utterance in terms of what the speaker intended to convey. We have not yet considered the fact that we usually know how the speaker intends us to "take" (or "interpret the function of") what is said. In very general terms, we can usually recognize the type of "action" performed by a speaker with the utterance. We use the term **speech act** to describe actions such as "requesting," "commanding," "questioning" or "informing." We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance. If you say, *I'll be there at six*, you are not just speaking, you seem to be performing the speech act of "promising."

Direct and indirect speech acts

We usually use certain syntactic structures with the functions listed beside them in the following table.

	Structures	**Functions**
Did you eat the pizza?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the pizza (please)!	Imperative	Command (Request)
You ate the pizza.	Declarative	Statement

When an interrogative structure such as *Did you…?*, *Are they…?* or *Can we…?* is used with the function of a question, it is described as a **direct speech act**. For example, when we don't know something and we ask someone to provide the information, we usually produce a direct speech act such as *Can you ride a bicycle?*.

Compare that utterance with *Can you pass the salt?*. In this second example, we are not really asking a question about someone's ability. In fact, we don't normally use this structure as a question at all. We normally use it to make a request. That is, we are using a syntactic structure associated with the function of a question, but in this case with the function of a request. This is an example of an **indirect speech act**. Whenever one of the structures in the set above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it on the same line, the result is an indirect speech act.

The utterance *You left the door open* has a declarative structure and, as a direct speech act, would be used to make a statement. However, if you say this to someone who has just come in (and it's really cold outside), you would probably want that person to close the door. You are not using the imperative structure. You are using a declarative structure to make a request. It's another example of an indirect speech act.

It is possible to have strange effects if one person fails to recognize another person's indirect speech act. Consider the following scene. A visitor to a city, carrying his luggage, looking lost, stops a passer-by.

VISITOR: *Excuse me. Do you know where the Ambassador Hotel is?*
PASSER-BY: *Oh sure, I know where it is.* (and walks away)

In this scene, the visitor uses a form normally associated with a question (*Do you know…?*), and the passer-by answers that question literally (*I know…*). That is, the passer-by is acting as if the utterance was a direct speech act instead of an indirect speech act used as a request for directions.

The main reason we use indirect speech acts seems to be that actions such as requests, presented in an indirect way (*Could you open that door for me?*), are generally considered to be more gentle or more polite in our society than direct speech acts (*Open that door for me!*). Exactly why they are considered to be more polite is based on some complex social assumptions.

Politeness

We can think of politeness in general terms as having to do with ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. In the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is "face." Your **face**, in pragmatics, is your public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. **Politeness** can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of another person's face.

If you say something that represents a threat to another person's self-image, that is called a **face-threatening act**. For example, if you use a direct speech act to get someone to do something (*Give me that paper!*), you are behaving as if you have more social power than the other person. If you don't actually have that social power (e.g. you're not a military officer or prison warden), then you are performing a face-threatening act. An indirect speech act, in the form associated with a question (*Could you pass me that paper?*), removes the assumption of social power. You're only asking if it's possible. This makes your request less threatening to the other person's face. Whenever you say something that lessens the possible threat to another's face, it can be described as a **face-saving act**.

Negative and positive face

We have both a negative face and a positive face. (Note that "negative" doesn't mean "bad" here, it's simply the opposite of "positive.") **Negative face** is the need to be independent and free from imposition. **Positive face** is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of the group. So, a face-saving act that emphasizes a person's negative face will show concern about imposition (*I'm sorry to bother you…*; *I know you're busy, but…*). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person's positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a common goal (*Let's do this together…*; *You and I have the same problem, so…*).

Ideas about the appropriate language to mark politeness differ substantially from one culture to the next. If you have grown up in a culture that has directness as a valued way of showing solidarity, and you use direct speech acts (*Give me that chair!*) to

people whose culture is more oriented to indirectness and avoiding direct imposition, then you will be considered impolite. You, in turn, may think of the others as vague and unsure of whether they really want something or are just asking about it (*Are you using this chair?*). In either case, it is the pragmatics that is misunderstood and, unfortunately, more will be communicated than is said.

Understanding how successful communication works is actually a process of interpreting not just what speakers say, but what they "intend to mean." We'll explore other aspects of this process in the next chapter.

Study questions

1   What kinds of deictic expressions are used in this utterance (e.g. *I* = person deixis)?

I'm busy now so you can't stay here. Come back later.

2   What are the anaphoric expressions in this sentence?

Dr. Foster gave Andy some medicine after he told her about his headaches and she advised him to take the pills three times a day until the pain went away.

3   What kind of inference is involved in interpreting each of these utterances?
  (a)   Teacher: *You can borrow my Shakespeare.*
  (b)   Waiter: *The ham sandwich left without paying.*
  (c)   Nurse: *The hernia in room 5 wants to talk to the doctor.*
  (d)   Dentist: *My eleven-thirty canceled so I had an early lunch.*

4   What is one obvious presupposition of a speaker who says:
  (a)   *Your clock isn't working.*
  (b)   *Where did he find the money?*
  (c)   *We regret buying that car.*
  (d)   *The king of France is bald.*

5   Someone stands between you and the TV set you're watching, so you decide to say one of the following. Identify which would be direct or indirect speech acts.
  (a) *Move!*   (c) *Could you please sit down?*
  (b) *You're in the way.*   (d) *Please get out of the way.*

6   In these examples, is the speaker appealing to positive or negative face?
  (a)   *If you're free, there's going to be a party at Yuri's place on Saturday.*
  (b)   *Let's go to the party at Yuri's place on Saturday. Everyone's invited.*

Tasks

A   What do you think is meant by the statement: "A context is a psychological construct" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995)?

B   Why is the concept of "deictic projection" necessary for the analysis of the following deictic expressions?
  (1)   On a telephone answering machine: *I am not here now.*
  (2)   On a map/directory: *YOU ARE HERE*
  (3)   Watching a horse race: *Oh, no. I'm in last place.*

    (4)   In a car that won't start: *Maybe I'm out of gas*.

    (5)   Pointing to an empty chair in class: *Where is she today?*

C   Which of these utterances contain "performative verbs" and how did you decide?

    (1)   *I apologize*.

    (2)   *He said he was sorry*.

    (3)   *I bet you $20*.

    (4)   *She won the bet*.

    (5)   *I drive a Mercedes*.

    (6)   *You must have a lot of money*.

D   What is metapragmatics? What aspects of the following utterance illustrate metapragmatic awareness?

   I know that Justin said, "I'll help you, darling," but he wasn't actually promising anything, I'm sure.

E   Using these examples, and any others you think are appropriate, try to decide if euphemisms and proverbs should be studied as part of pragmatics. Are they, for example, similar to indirect speech acts?

    (1)   *She's got a bun in the oven*.

    (2)   *He's gone to a better place*.

    (3)   *Unfortunately, there was some collateral damage*.

    (4)   *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*.

    (5)   *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride*.

    (6)   *People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones*.

F   The following phrases were all on signs advertising sales. What is being sold in each case and (if you know) what other words would you add to the description to make it clearer? What is the underlying structure of each phrase? For example, *Furniture Sale* might have the structure: "someone is selling furniture." Would the same structure be appropriate for *Garage Sale* and the others?

Back-to-School Sale	*Dollar Sale*	*One Cent Sale*
Bake Sale	*Foundation Sale*	*Plant Sale*
Big Screen Sale	*Furniture Sale*	*Sidewalk Sale*
Clearance Sale	*Garage Sale*	*Spring Sale*
Close-out Sale	*Labor Day Sale*	*Tent Sale*
Colorful White Sale	*Liquidation Sale*	*Yard Sale*

Discussion topics/projects

I   Let's imagine you were in a situation where you had to ask your parents if you could go out to a dance and you received one of these two responses. Do you think that these responses have the same or different "meanings"?

"Yes, of course, go."   *"If you want, you can go."*

Next, consider this situation, described in Tannen (1986).

A Greek woman explained how she and her father (and later her husband) communicated. If she wanted to do something, like go to a dance, she had to ask her father for permission. He never said no. But she could tell from the way he said yes whether or not he meant it. If he said something like "Yes, of course, go," then she knew he thought it was a good idea. If he said something like "If you want, you can go," then she understood that he didn't think it was a good idea, and she wouldn't go.

Why do you think "he never said no" (when he was communicating "No")?
How would you analyze the two speech acts reported as responses in this passage?
Are you familiar with any other comparable situations where "more is communicated than is said"?
(For background reading, see chapter 4 of Tannen, 1986.)

II What counts as polite behavior can differ substantially from one group or culture to the next. Below are some basic descriptions from Lakoff (1990) of three types of politeness, called distance politeness, deference politeness and camaraderie politeness. As you read these descriptions, try to decide which type you are most familiar with and whether you have encountered the others on any occasion. What kind of language do you think is characteristic of these different types of politeness?

- "Distance politeness is the civilized human analogue to the territorial strategies of other animals. An animal sets up physical boundary markers (the dog and the hydrant) to signal its fellows: My turf, stay out. We, being symbol-using creatures, create symbolic fences."
- "Distancing cultures weave remoteness into their language."
- "Another culture might avoid the danger of conflict by adopting a strategy of deferential politeness. If a participant decides that whatever is to happen in a conversation – both what is said and what it is to mean – is up to the other person, conflict can easily be avoided."

- "Where distance politeness more or less assumes equality between participants, deference works by debasing one or both."
- "While distance politeness has been characteristic of the middle and upper classes in most of Europe for a very long time, deference has been typical in many Asian societies. But it is also the preferred model of interaction for women in the majority of societies, either always or only when talking to men."
- "A third strategy (camaraderie) that has recently emerged in this culture makes a different assumption: that interaction and connection are good in themselves, that openness is the greatest sign of courtesy."
- "In a camaraderie system, the appearance of openness and niceness is to be sought above all else. There is no holding back, nothing is too terrible to say."

(For background reading, see chapter 2 of Lakoff, 1990.)

Further reading

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11 Discourse analysis

There's two types of favors, the big favor and the small favor. You can measure the size of the favor by the pause that a person takes after they ask you to "Do me a favor." Small favor – small pause. "Can you do me a favor, hand me that pencil." No pause at all. Big favors are, "Could you do me a favor …" Eight seconds go by. "Yeah? What?"

"… well." The longer it takes them to get to it, the bigger the pain it's going to be.

Humans are the only species that do favors. Animals don't do favors. A lizard doesn't go up to a cockroach and say, "Could you do me a favor and hold still, I'd like to eat you alive." That's a big favor even with no pause.

Seinfeld (1993)

In the study of language, some of the most interesting observations are made, not in terms of the components of language, but in terms of the way language is used, even how pauses are used, as in comedian Jerry Seinfeld's commentary. We have already considered some of the features of language in use when we discussed pragmatics in the preceding chapter. We were, in effect, asking how it is that language-users successfully interpret what other language-users intend to convey. When we carry this investigation further and ask how we make sense of what we read, how we can recognize well-constructed texts as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent, how we understand speakers who communicate more than they say, and how we successfully take part in that complex activity called conversation, we are undertaking what is known as **discourse analysis**.

Discourse analysis

The word "discourse" is usually defined as "language beyond the sentence" and so the analysis of discourse is typically concerned with the study of language in texts and conversation. In many of the preceding chapters, when we were concentrating on linguistic description, we were concerned with the accurate representation of the forms and structures. However, as language-users, we are capable of more than simply recognizing correct versus incorrect forms and structures. We can cope with fragments in newspaper headlines such as *Trains collide, two die*, and know that what happened in the first part was the cause of what happened in the second part. We can also make sense of notices like *No shoes, no service*, on shop windows in summer, understanding that a conditional relation exists between the two parts ("If you are wearing no shoes, you will receive no service"). We have the ability to create complex discourse interpretations of fragmentary linguistic messages.

Interpreting discourse

We can even cope with texts, written in English, which we couldn't produce ourselves and which appear to break a lot of the rules of the English language. Yet we can build an interpretation. The following example, provided by Eric Nelson, is from an essay by a student learning English and contains all kinds of errors, yet it can be understood.

> *My Town*
> *My natal was in a small town, very close to Riyadh capital of Saudi Arabia. The distant between my town and Riyadh 7 miles exactly. The name of this Almasani that means in English Factories. It takes this name from the peopl's carrer. In my childhood I remmeber the people live. It was very simple. Most the people was farmer.*

This example may serve to illustrate a simple point about the way we react to language that contains ungrammatical forms. Rather than simply reject the text as ungrammatical, we try to make sense of it. That is, we attempt to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of what the writer intended to convey. (Most people say they understand the "My Town" text quite easily.)

It is this effort to interpret (or to be interpreted), and how we accomplish it, that are the key elements investigated in the study of discourse. To arrive at an interpretation, and to make our messages interpretable, we certainly rely on what we know about linguistic form and structure. But, as language-users, we have more knowledge than that.

Cohesion

We know, for example, that texts must have a certain structure that depends on factors quite different from those required in the structure of a single sentence. Some of those factors are described in terms of **cohesion**, or the ties and connections that exist within texts. A number of those types of **cohesive ties** can be identified in the following paragraph.

> *My father once bought a Lincoln convertible. He did it by saving every penny he could. That car would be worth a fortune nowadays. However, he sold it to help pay for my college education. Sometimes I think I'd rather have the convertible.*

There are connections present here in the use of words to maintain reference to the same people and things throughout: *father – he – he – he*; *my – my – I*; *Lincoln – it*. There are connections between phrases such as: *a Lincoln convertible – that car – the convertible.* There are more general connections created by a number of terms that share a common element of meaning, such as "money" (*bought – saving – penny – worth a fortune – sold – pay*) and "time" *(once – nowadays – sometimes)*. There is also a connector (*However*) that marks the relationship of what follows to what went before. The verb tenses in the first four sentences are all in the past, creating a connection between those events, and a different time is indicated by the present tense of the final sentence.

Analysis of these cohesive ties within a text gives us some insight into how writers structure what they want to say. An appropriate number of cohesive ties may be a crucial factor in our judgments on whether something is well written or not. It has also been noted that the conventions of cohesive structure differ from one language to the next and may be one of the sources of difficulty encountered in translating texts.

However, by itself, cohesion would not be sufficient to enable us to make sense of what we read. It is quite easy to create a highly cohesive text that has a lot of connections between the sentences, but is very difficult to interpret. Note that the following text has connections such as *Lincoln – the car, red – that color, her – she, letters – a letter*, and so on.

> *My father bought a Lincoln convertible. The car driven by the police was red. That color doesn't suit her. She consists of three letters. However, a letter isn't as fast as a telephone call.*

It becomes clear from this type of example that the "connectedness" we experience in our interpretation of normal texts is not simply based on connections between

the words. There must be some other factor that leads us to distinguish connected texts that make sense from those that do not. This factor is usually described as "coherence."

Coherence

The key to the concept of **coherence** ("everything fitting together well") is not something that exists in words or structures, but something that exists in people. It is people who "make sense" of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation that is in line with their experience of the way the world is. Indeed, our ability to make sense of what we read is probably only a small part of that general ability we have to make sense of what we perceive or experience in the world. You may have found when you were reading the last example (of oddly constructed text) that you kept trying to make the text fit some situation or experience that would accommodate all the details (involving a red car, a woman and a letter). If you work at it long enough, you may indeed find a way to incorporate all those disparate elements into a single coherent interpretation. In doing so, you would necessarily be involved in a process of filling in a lot of gaps that exist in the text. You would have to create meaningful connections that are not actually expressed by the words and sentences. This process is not restricted to trying to understand "odd" texts. In one way or another, it seems to be involved in our interpretation of all discourse.

It is certainly present in the interpretation of casual conversation. We are continually taking part in conversational interactions where a great deal of what is meant is not actually present in what is said. Perhaps it is the ease with which we ordinarily anticipate each other's intentions that makes this whole complex process seem so unremarkable. Here is a good example, adapted from Widdowson (1978).

HER: *That's the telephone.*
HIM: *I'm in the bath.*
HER: *O.K.*

There are certainly no cohesive ties within this fragment of discourse. How does each of these people manage to make sense of what the other says? They do use the information contained in the sentences expressed, but there must be something else involved in the interpretation. It has been suggested that exchanges of this type are best understood in terms of the conventional actions performed by the speakers in such interactions. Drawing on concepts derived from the study of speech acts (introduced in Chapter 10), we can characterize the brief conversation in the following way.

She makes a request of him to perform action.
He states reason why he cannot comply with request.
She undertakes to perform action.

If this is a reasonable analysis of what took place in the conversation, then it is clear that language-users must have a lot of knowledge of how conversation works that is not simply "linguistic" knowledge.

Speech events

In exploring what it is we know about taking part in conversation, or any other speech event (e.g. debate, interview, various types of discussions), we quickly realize that there is enormous variation in what people say and do in different circumstances. In order to begin to describe the sources of that variation, we would have to take account of a number of criteria. For example, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer (or hearers) and their relationship(s), whether they were friends, strangers, men, women, young, old, of equal or unequal status, and many other factors. All of these factors will have an influence on what is said and how it is said. We would have to describe what the topic of conversation was and in what setting it took place. Some of the effects of these factors on the way language is used are explored in greater detail in Chapters 19 and 20. Yet, even when we have described all these factors, we will still not have analyzed the actual structure of the conversation itself. As language-users, in a particular culture, we clearly have quite sophisticated knowledge of how conversation works.

Conversation analysis

In simple terms, English conversation can be described as an activity in which, for the most part, two or more people take **turns** at speaking. Typically, only one person speaks at a time and there tends to be an avoidance of silence between speaking turns. (This is not true in all situations or societies.) If more than one participant tries to talk at the same time, one of them usually stops, as in the following example, where A stops until B has finished.

A: *Didn't you [know wh-*
B: *[But he must've been there by two*
A: *Yes but you knew where he was going*

(A small square bracket [is conventionally used to indicate a place where simultaneous or overlapping speech occurs.)

For the most part, participants wait until one speaker indicates that he or she has finished, usually by signaling a **completion point**. Speakers can mark their turns as complete in a number of ways: by asking a question, for example, or by pausing at the end of a completed syntactic structure like a phrase or sentence. Other participants can indicate that they want to take the speaking turn, also in a number of ways. They can start to make short sounds, usually repeated, while the speaker is talking, and often use body shifts or facial expressions to signal that they have something to say.

Turn-taking

There are different expectations of conversational style and different strategies of participation in conversation. Some of these strategies seem to be the source of what is sometimes described by participants as "rudeness" (if one speaker cuts in on another speaker) or "shyness" (if one speaker keeps waiting for an opportunity to take a turn and none seems to occur). The participants characterized as "rude" or "shy" in this way may simply be adhering to slightly different conventions of **turn-taking**.

One strategy, which may be overused by "long-winded" speakers or those who are used to "holding the floor," is designed to avoid having normal completion points occur. We all use this strategy to some extent, usually in situations where we have to work out what we are trying to say while actually saying it. If the normal expectation is that completion points are marked by the end of a sentence and a pause, then one way to "keep the turn" is to avoid having those two markers occur together. That is, don't pause at the end of sentences; make your sentences run on by using connectors like *and, and then, so, but*; place your pauses at points where the message is clearly incomplete; and preferably "fill" the pause with a hesitation marker such as *er, em, uh, ah*.

In the following example, note how the pauses (marked by …) are placed before and after verbs rather than at the end of sentences, making it difficult to get a clear sense of what this person is saying until we hear the part after each pause.

A: *that's their favorite restaurant because they … enjoy French food and when they were … in France they couldn't believe it that … you know that they had … that they had had better meals back home*

In the next example, speaker X produces **filled pauses** (with *em, er, you know*) after having almost lost the turn at his first brief hesitation.

X: *well that film really was … [wasn't what he was good at*
Y: *[when di-*

X: *I mean his other … em his later films were much more … er really more in the
romantic style and that was more what what he was … you know … em best at doing*
Y: *so when did he make that one*

These types of strategies, by themselves, should not be considered undesirable or domineering. They are present in the conversational speech of most people and they are part of what makes conversation work. We recognize these subtle indicators as ways of organizing our turns and negotiating the intricate business of social interaction via language. In fact, one of the most noticeable features of conversational discourse is that it is generally very "co-operative." This observation has been formulated as a principle of conversation.

The co-operative principle

An underlying assumption in most conversational exchanges seems to be that the participants are co-operating with each other. This principle, together with four maxims that we expect our conversational partners to obey, was first described by the philosopher Paul Grice. The **co-operative principle** is stated in the following way: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975: 45). Supporting this principle are four maxims, often called the "Gricean maxims."

The Quantity maxim: Make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more, or less, than is required.

The Quality maxim: Do not say that which you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Relation maxim: Be relevant.

The Manner maxim: Be clear, brief and orderly.

It is certainly true that, on occasion, we can experience conversational exchanges in which the co-operative principle may not seem to be in operation. However, this general description of the normal expectations we have in conversation helps to explain a number of regular features in the way people say things. For example, during their lunch break, one woman asks another how she likes the sandwich she is eating and receives the following answer.

Oh, a sandwich is a sandwich.

In logical terms, this reply appears to have no communicative value since it states something obvious and doesn't seem to be informative at all. However, if the woman is

being co-operative and adhering to the Quantity maxim about being "as informative as is required," then the listener must assume that her friend is communicating something. Given the opportunity to evaluate the sandwich, her friend has responded without an explicit evaluation, thereby implying that she has no opinion, good or bad, to express. That is, her friend has essentially communicated that the sandwich isn't worth talking about.

Hedges

We use certain types of expressions, called **hedges**, to show that we are concerned about following the maxims while being co-operative participants in conversation. Hedges can be defined as words or phrases used to indicate that we're not really sure that what we're saying is sufficiently correct or complete. We can use *sort of* or *kind of* as hedges on the accuracy of our statements, as in descriptions such as *His hair was kind of long* or *The book cover is sort of yellow* (rather than *It is yellow*). These are examples of hedges on the Quality maxim. Other examples would include the expressions listed below that people sometimes put at the beginning of their conversational contributions.

> *As far as I know …,*
> *Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but …*
> *I'm not absolutely sure, but ….*

We also take care to indicate that what we report is something we *think* or *feel* (not *know*), is *possible* or *likely* (not *certain*), and *may* or *could* (not *must*) happen. Hence the difference between saying *Jackson is guilty* and *I think it's possible that Jackson may be guilty*. In the first version, we will be assumed to have very good evidence for the statement.

Implicatures

When we try to analyze how hedges work, we usually talk about speakers implying something that is not said. Similarly, in considering what the woman meant by *a sandwich is a sandwich*, we decided that she was implying that the sandwich wasn't worth talking about. With the co-operative principle and the maxims as guides, we can start to work out how people actually decide that someone is "implying" something in conversation. Consider the following example.

CAROL: *Are you coming to the party tonight?*
LARA: *I've got an exam tomorrow.*

On the face of it, Lara's statement is not an answer to Carol's question. Lara doesn't say *Yes* or *No*. Yet Carol will immediately interpret the statement as meaning "No" or "Probably not." How can we account for this ability to grasp one meaning from a sentence that, in a literal sense, means something else? It seems to depend, at least partially, on the assumption that Lara is being relevant and informative, adhering to the maxims of Relation and Quantity. (To appreciate this point, try to imagine Carol's reaction if Lara had said something like *Roses are red, you know.*) Given that Lara's original answer contains relevant information, Carol can work out that "exam tomorrow" conventionally involves "study tonight," and "study tonight" precludes "party tonight." Thus, Lara's answer is not simply a statement about tomorrow's activities, it contains an **implicature** (an additional conveyed meaning) concerning tonight's activities.

It is noticeable that, in order to describe the conversational implicature involved in Lara's statement, we had to appeal to some background knowledge (about exams, studying and partying) that must be shared by the conversational participants. Investigating how we use our background knowledge to arrive at interpretations of what we hear and read is a critical part of doing discourse analysis.

Background knowledge

A particularly good example of the processes involved in using background knowledge was provided by Sanford and Garrod (1981), who presented readers with a short text, one sentence at a time. Their text begins with the following two sentences.

> *John was on his way to school last Friday.*
> *He was really worried about the math lesson.*

Most people who are asked to read these sentences report that they think John is probably a schoolboy. Since this piece of information is not directly stated in the text, it must be an inference. Other inferences, for different readers, are that John is walking or that he is on a bus. These inferences are clearly derived from our conventional knowledge, in our culture, about "going to school," and no reader has ever suggested that John is swimming or on a boat, though both are physically possible, if unlikely, interpretations.

An interesting aspect of the reported inferences is that they are treated as likely or possible interpretations that readers will quickly abandon if they do not fit in with some subsequent information. Here is the next sentence in the text.

> *Last week he had been unable to control the class.*

On encountering this sentence, most readers decide that John is, in fact, a teacher and that he is not very happy. Many report that he is probably driving a car to school. Then the next sentence is presented.

It was unfair of the math teacher to leave him in charge.

Suddenly, John reverts to his schoolboy status, and the inference that he is a teacher is quickly abandoned. The final sentence of the text contains a surprise.

After all, it is not a normal part of a janitor's duties.

This type of text and manner of presentation, one sentence at a time, is rather artificial, of course. Yet the exercise involved does provide us with some insight into the ways in which we "build" interpretations of what we read by using a lot more information than is presented in the words on the page. That is, we actually create what the text is about, based on our expectations of what normally happens. In attempting to describe this phenomenon, researchers often use the concept of a "schema" or a "script."

Schemas and scripts

A **schema** is a general term for a conventional knowledge structure that exists in memory. We were using our conventional knowledge of what a school classroom is like, or a "classroom schema," as we tried to make sense of the previous example. We have many schemas (or schemata) that are used in the interpretation of what we experience and what we hear or read about. If you hear someone describe what happened during a visit to a supermarket, you don't have to be told what is normally found in a supermarket. You already have a "supermarket schema" (food displayed on shelves, arranged in aisles, shopping carts and baskets, check-out counter, and other conventional features) as part of your background knowledge.

Similar in many ways to a schema is a **script**. A script is essentially a dynamic schema. That is, instead of the set of typical fixed features in a schema, a script has a series of conventional actions that take place. You have a script for "Going to the dentist" and another script for "Going to the movies." We all have versions of an "Eating in a restaurant" script, which we can activate to make sense of this short text.

Trying not to be out of the office for long, Suzy went into the nearest place, sat down and ordered an avocado sandwich. It was quite crowded, but the service was fast, so she left a good tip. Back in the office, things were not going well.

On the basis of our restaurant script, we would be able to say a number of things about the scene and events briefly described in this short text. For example, although the text doesn't have this information, we would assume that Suzy opened a door to get into the restaurant, that there were tables there, that she ate the sandwich, then she paid for it, and so on. The fact that information of this type can turn up in people's attempts to remember the text is further evidence of the existence of scripts. It is also a good indication of the fact that our understanding of what we read doesn't come directly from what words and sentences are on the page, but the interpretations we create, in our minds, of what we read.

Indeed, crucial information is sometimes omitted from important instructions on the assumption that everybody knows the script. Think carefully about the following instructions from a bottle of cough syrup.

Fill measure cup to line
and repeat every 2 to 3 hours.

No, you've not just to keep filling the measure cup every 2 to 3 hours. Nor have you to rub the cough syrup on your neck or in your hair. You are expected to know the script and *drink* the stuff from the measure cup every 2 or 3 hours.

Clearly, our understanding of what we read is not only based on what we see on the page (language structures), but also on other things that we have in mind (knowledge structures). To understand more about the connection between these two things, we have to take a close look at the workings of the human brain.

Study questions

1 How is the word "discourse" usually defined?
2 What is the basic difference between cohesion and coherence?
3 How do speakers mark completion points at the end of a turn?
4 What are hedges in discourse?
5 Which maxim does this speaker seem to be particularly careful about?

I may be mistaken, but I thought I saw a wedding ring on his finger.

6 In the study of discourse understanding, what are scripts?

Tasks

A In the analysis of discourse, what is "intertextuality"?
B In conversation analysis, what is the difference between a "preferred" response and a "dispreferred" response? How would you characterize the responses by *She* in these two examples?

(i) HE: *How about going for some coffee?*
SHE: *Oh … eh … I'd love to … but you see … I … I'm supposed to get this thing finished … you know.*

(ii) HE: *I think she's really sexy.*
SHE: *Well … er … I'm not sure … you may be right … but you see … other people probably don't go for all that … you know … all that make-up … so em sorry but I don't think so.*

C The following extract is from a conversation between two women chatting about people they both knew in high school (Overstreet, 1999: 112–113). The phrase *or something* is used twice by Crystal in this extract. Is she adhering to the Co-operative Principle and the Quality maxim or not? How did you decide?

JULIE: *I can't remember any ge- guys in our grade that were gay.*
CRYSTAL: *Larry Brown an' an' John Murphy. I – huh I dunno, I heard John Murphy was dressed – was like a transvestite or something.*
JULIE: *You're kidding.*
CRYSTAL: *I – I dunno. That was a – an old rumor, I don't even know if it was true.*
JULIE: *That's funny.*
CRYSTAL: *Or cross-dresser or something.*
JULIE: *Larry – Larry Brown is gay?*

D   (i)   Identify the main cohesive ties in this first paragraph of a novel (Faulkner, 1929).
   (ii)   What do you think "they" were hitting?

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. They went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.

E   This is a version of a story described in Widdowson (2007). When most people first read this story, they find it confusing. Can you identify the source of this confusion in terms of background knowledge or assumptions?

A man and his son were crossing the street one day when a car suddenly came towards them and hit the boy, knocking him down. In less than ten minutes an ambulance came and took the boy to the nearest hospital. As the boy was being taken into the emergency room, one of the surgeons saw him and cried out, "Oh no. This is my son!"

F   (i)   What is Critical Discourse Analysis?
   (ii)   How might the following text be analyzed using that approach? This text originally appeared in the British newspaper the *Sun* (February 2, 1989) and is cited in van Dijk (1996: 98) and Cameron (2001: 127).

BRITAIN INVADED BY ARMY OF ILLEGALS

Britain is being swamped by a tide of illegal immigrants so desperate for a job that they will work for a pittance in our restaurants, cafés and nightclubs.

   Immigration officers are being overwhelmed with work. Last year, 2191 "illegals" were nabbed and sent back home. But there were tens of thousands more, slaving behind bars, cleaning hotel rooms and working in kitchens …

   Illegals sneak in by:

- DECEIVING immigration officers when they are quizzed at airports
- DISAPPEARING after their entry visas run out
- FORGING work permits and other documents
- RUNNING AWAY from immigration detention centres

Discussion topics/projects

I   In the study of discourse, a distinction is often made between "new information" (treated as new for the reader or listener) and "given information" (treated as already known by the reader or listener). Read through the following recipe for bread sauce and identify the ways in which given information is presented. (Try to think carefully about carrying out the instructions in the Method section and how many unmentioned things you are assumed to have and use.)

Ingredients:	1 small onion	3 oz. fresh breadcrumbs
	2 cloves	1 oz. butter
	1 cup of milk	pepper and salt

Method: Peel the onion and push cloves into it. Simmer gently with the milk and butter for at least twenty minutes. Remove the onion, pour the milk over the breadcrumbs. Let this stand to thicken and reheat before serving.

(For background reading, see chapter 5 of Brown and Yule, 1983.)

II   According to Deborah Schiffrin, "the analysis of discourse markers is part of the more general analysis of discourse coherence" (1987: 49). Looking at the use of discourse markers (in bold) in the following extract from conversation, do you think that they help to make this discourse more coherent? If any of them were omitted, would it become less coherent? Given these examples, how would you define discourse markers? Do you think the word *like* (used twice here) should be treated as a discourse marker?

*I believe in that. Whatever's gonna happen is gonna happen. I believe … that … **y'know** it's fate. It really is. **Because** eh my husband has a brother, that was killed in an automobile accident, **and** at the same time there was another fellow, in there, that walked away with not even a scratch on him. **And** I really fee- I don't feel y'can push fate, **and** I think a lot of people do. **But** I feel that you were put here for so many, years or whatever the case is, **and** that's how it was meant to be. **Because** like when we got married, we were supposed t'get married uh like about five months later. My husband got a notice t'go into the service **and** we moved it up. **And** my father died the week … after we got married. While we were on our honeymoon. **And** I just felt, that move was meant to be, **because** if not, he wouldn't have been there. **So** eh **y'know** it just s- seems that that's how things work.*

(For background reading, see chapter 3 of Schiffrin, 1987.)

Further reading

Basic treatments

Cutting, J. (2008) *Pragmatics and Discourse* (2nd edition) Routledge

Widdowson, H. (2007) *Discourse Analysis* Oxford University Press

More detailed treatments

Paltridge, B. (2006) *Discourse Analysis* Continuum

Renkema, J. (2004) *Introduction to Discourse Studies* (2nd edition) John Benjamins

Specifically on spoken discourse

Cameron, D. (2001) *Working with Spoken Discourse* Sage

Conversation analysis

Have, P. (2007) *Doing Conversation Analysis* (2nd edition) Sage

Psathas, G. (1995) *Conversation Analysis* Sage

The Gricean maxims

Chapman, S. (2005) *Paul Grice: Philosopher and Linguist* Palgrave Macmillan

Grice, P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words* Harvard University Press

Schemas and scripts

Brown, G. and G. Yule (1983) *Discourse Analysis* (chapter 7) Cambridge University Press

Other references

Grice, P. (1975) "Logic and conversation" In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (41–58) Academic Press

Faulkner, W. (1929) *The Sound and the Fury* Jonathan Cape

Overstreet, M. (1999) *Whales, Candlelight and Stuff Like That: General Extenders in English Discourse* Oxford University Press

Sanford, A. and S. Garrod (1981) *Understanding Written Language* Wiley

Schiffrin, D. (1987) *Discourse Markers* Cambridge University Press

van Dijk, T. (1996) "Discourse, power and access" In C. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds.) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (84–104) Routledge

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