Intro to Linguistics – Pragmatics
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Overview of topics

1. Pragmatics & Context

2. Speech Acts

3. Conversational Maxims

1 Pragmatics & Context

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used and of the effect of context on language.

Several types of **context**:

1. **Physical context** – objects surrounding the communication, place and time of the the communication, what is going on around, etc.

    (1) a. *I want* that *book.* accompanied by pointing
       b. *Be* here *at 9:00* tonight*.* place/time reference

2. **Linguistic context** – what has been said before in the conversation.

    (2) a. *Linda came home late yesterday.* She *thought nobody would notice.*
       b. *If my mom heard you talk* like that*, . . .*

3. **Social context** – the social relationship of the people involved in communication.

    (3) a. To the President: #*Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home.*
       b. To your friend: #*I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavor to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs.*
       Better: *Call me when you get home.*

    Note: In Linguistics, # is used to mark sentences that are semantically or pragmatically odd.

4. **Epistemic context** – what is known by both speaker and hearer.

    Epistemic: from Greek *episteme* (knowledge), *epi + histanai* (to place, determine)
    Cf. *system, stem, steed, arrest, instant, understand, static, prostitute, insist, ecstasy.*

2 Speech Acts

Speech act – usage of language to accomplish something.

- Direct speech acts: typical sentence form (e.g. *interrogative sentence for a question*)

- Indirect speech acts – the form of the sentence suggest a different purpose than it actually has.

(4) a. *Could you close the door?*
    You left the door open.
    Please close the door.

   b. *There are wolves on the prowl tonight.*
    I'm warning you to watch out for wolves.

3 Conversational Maxims

According to H. Paul Grice (English philosopher, 1913-88) there are several principles which people implicitly obey when communicating (assuming cooperative conversation).

Maxim of Relevance: Be relevant.

Assuming B follows this maxim, A can interpret their answer:

(5) a. A: *Is Sandy dating anyone these days?*
    B: *Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.*

   b. A: *Can you pick the kids up at school this afternoon?*
    B: *I have piano lessons at 3 p.m.*

Maxims of Quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
   i.e., "Don't say too little"

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
   i.e., "Don't say too much"

We usually assume that people are telling us everything we need to know. If they don't say something, then we assume they simply don't know that information or it is not relevant.

A breaks the maxim:

(6) a. *A: John and Mary have 2 children.*
        B: Are they planning on having a third?
        A: They already have a third child.

    b. *B: How did Harry fare in court the other day?*
        A: Oh, he got a fine. (True, but Harry also got a death sentence)

Also **Maxim of Quality** and **Maxims of Manner**

Implicature – what is suggested in an utterance even though it is not explicitelly expressed nor entailed by it. We "compute" the implicature of a sentence based on the rules of conversation (maxims).

Because of these maxims we can be more brief, since we don't need to say everything we would need to if we were being perfectly logical. (We don't say *John has 4 and only 4 children*).

Flouting a Maxim – speaker intentionally breaks some of the maxims, but not to be noncooperative. Way how to say something indirectly (e.g., sarcasm, irony, fun).