Speaker’s Meaning, Speech Acts, Topic and Focus, Questions

Read: Portner: 24-25, 190-198
Sentence vs. Utterance

• **Sentence**: a unit of language that is syntactically well-formed and can stand alone in discourse as an autonomous linguistic unit, and has a compositionally derived meaning:
  – A sentence consists of a subject and a predicate: $S \rightarrow NP \ VP$.
  – $[[NP\ VP]]^{M,g} = 1$ iff $[[NP]]^{M,g} \subset [[VP]]^{M,g}$

• **Utterance**: The occurrence (use) of a sentence (or possibly smaller constituent that can stand alone) at a given time.
  • Bill: Sue is coming. Jane: Yes, Sue is coming.
    – Two utterances of the same sentence. Same meaning.
  • Bill: “I am tired.” Jane: “I am tired, too”
    – Two utterances of the same sentence. Two different meanings.

• Semantics studies the meaning of sentences; pragmatics studies the meaning of utterances.
Semantic Meaning vs. Speaker Meaning

• A: Most of the people here seem pretty glum.
• B: Not everybody. The man drinking champagne is happy.
• A: Where?
• B: That guy! (pointing)
• A: He’s not drinking champagne. He’s drinking sparkling water. The only person drinking champagne is crying on the couch. See?
• B: Well, what I meant was that the first guy is happy.

[c.f. Donnellan 1966, Kripke 1977]
• The \textit{semantic} (or \textit{expression}) \textit{meaning} of a sentence (or a smaller constituent) is its literal meaning, based on what the words individually mean and the grammar of the language.

• The \textit{speaker’s meaning} of a sentence is what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

• These often coincide, but can diverge.
  – Irony, metaphor, short cuts (metonymy), etc.
    • “The people remember September 11th.”

• Semantics studies semantic meaning, and pragmatics studies speaker’s meaning.
Humpty Dumpty

“…There’s glory for you!”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,” Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t--till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knockdown argument for you’.”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knockdown argument’,” Alice objected.
“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master--that’s all.”

[From Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland.]
Speech Acts

• Austin (1962):
  – Unlike constatives, performative sentences do not seem tied up with their judging the world to be a certain way.
  – Their point is to do something, not to say something that is true or false:
    • I now declare you man and wife.
    • I hereby warn you not to come onto my property again.
    • I promise that I will call you this weekend.
  – The main verb in a fully explicit performative sentence describes the act that the utterance performs.
  – To have an effect on the world, performatives must be embedded into a social context that gives them the power to affect the world. The extralinguistic requirements are its felicity conditions.
There is a conventional procedure (the “ceremony”) for getting people to be married. (This is partially specified by civil laws, but also by religious laws.)

I.A. The circumstances and people involved in the ceremony must be appropriate (e.g. the people must be free to marry, the official performing the ceremony must have the right to do so.)
   • If not there is a “misfire” and the act does not succeed, i.e. there is a “misinvocation”.

B. The ceremony must be correctly and completely executed.
   • If not, there is a “misfire” and the act does not succeed, i.e. a there is a “misexecution”: a “flaw” or a “hitch”.

II. The people involved must have appropriate thoughts (e.g. one must mean what one is promising in the marriage ceremony).
   • If not, the act succeeds, but there is an “abuse”: a “sincerity condition” is violated.
• Felicity conditions are essentially presuppositions within the realm of performatives. (NH: Perhaps implicatures for sincerity conditions.)

• As Austin pointed out, once we get into the habit of thinking of the fact that in using language we perform actions of various kinds, the conceptual distinction between performative and constative seems to break down.
  – *That cat is cute.*
    • I *utter* some sounds. I *express* the proposition that Nicky is cute (assuming that *that cat* refers to Nicky in the context). I *assert* that Nicky is cute. I imply that I am sincere in what I say, i.e. that I believe that Nicky is cute.

• Any utterance performs one or more speech acts (Austin, Searle).
Austin and Searle
Three kinds of acts associated with any utterance

- **The locutionary act**: phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics. The utterance of certain sounds, in a certain linguistic system (of sound and form), expressing a particular proposition.

- **The illocutionary act**: the communicative action which the speaker intends to perform by getting the hearer to understand that this is his (the speaker’s) intention.
  - What the speaker does *in* saying something, e.g. to assert that Nicky is cute; to ask whether Nicky is cute.
  - This is the *illocutionary force* of the utterance.

- **The perlocutionary act**: the effects which the speaker brings about by means of the locutionary and illocutionary acts.
  - What the speaker does *by* saying something, e.g. to get you to come take care of Nicky when I am away, to give you the idea of sending me a picture of *your* cat.
The illocutionary act is the one giving rise to the utterance’s “non-natural meaning” (Grice 1957). Non-natural meaning is present whenever a speaker wants to have some communicative effect on a hearer, and tries to achieve this effect by saying something which will let the hearer figure out, using his or her knowledge of the language and his or her recognition of the speaker’s intention, that this is what the speaker intends. In saying, “Sit down!” I intend you to figure out what the sentence means, and then to figure out that I said this because I wanted you to sit down. If I intended to annoy you by telling you what to do in saying this, this probably would not be non-natural meaning since I probably wouldn’t intend you to recognize that I want to annoy you. If I did, maybe I’d be teasing you and only pretending to utter a command.
– Natural meaning doesn’t involve the recognition of an intention to communicate:
  • Smoke means fire, Lightening means thunder,
    Those spots mean that you have the measles,
    Honey bees dance means the nectar is located in a certain direction and distance.

BLINK: natural meaning
WINK: non-natural meaning
Indirect Speech Acts

• Indirect speech acts occur when the illocutionary force is not revealed in the sentence’s form in any clear way.
  – *I’d like you to sit down now.*

  • Has the form of a declarative, but the force of a command.
    – Direct speech act: stating that I’d like you to sit down.
    – Indirect speech act (conversational implicature): ordering you to sit down.
Sentence Types

• Sentence types (declarative, interrogative, imperative) are associated conventionally with certain direct illocutionary forces (assertion, question, command).
  – Perhaps all languages have these sentence types.
  – There are dozens or hundreds more illocutionary acts: promising, predicting, threatening, hinting, proposing, denying,…, each of which has its own felicity conditions.
PROMISES: Felicity Conditions (Searle 1969)

- Propositional content condition:
  - Future act A of S.

- Preparatory conditions:
  - H would prefer S’s doing A to his not doing A.
  - It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of things.

- Sincerity condition:
  - S intends to do A.

- Essential condition:
  - Counts as a commitment that S will do A.
REQUESTS: Felicity Conditions
(Searle 1969)

• Propositional content condition:
  – Future act A of H

• Preparatory conditions:
  – S believes H can do A
  – It is not obvious that H would do A without being asked.

• Sincerity condition:
  – S wants H to do A

• Essential condition:
  – Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.
QUESTIONS: Felicity Conditions
(Searle 1969)

• Propositional content condition:
  – Any proposition or propositional function.

• Preparatory conditions:
  – S does not know ‘the answer’ (but see comment)
  – S thinks it is not obvious to both S and H that H will provide the information at that time without being asked.

• Sincerity condition:
  – S wants this information.

• Essential condition:
  – Counts as an attempt to elicit this information from H.

COMMENT: There are two kinds of questions, (a) real questions, (b) exam questions. In real questions S wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, S wants to know if H knows.
The Meaning and Intonation of Yes-No Questions: A Corpus Study
(Hedberg, Sosa, Görgülü-in progress)

- Did you have a good time?
  L*HH%

- Do you still work for a veterinarian?
  H* !H* L*HH%

H*: high pitch accent, L* low pitch accent
!H*: downstepped high pitch accent
HH%: rising boundary tone

- Yes-no interrogative sentences (exhibiting subject-auxiliary inversion) are normally rising at the end, and directly express questions.
• Direct Act: question
• Indirect Act: request for action/command

• Can we **talk** about the **job** things now?
  
  H*            L*LL%

• Yeah, would **you** please **tell** them?
  
  L*+H          L*LL%

LL%  Low boundary tone: fall
L*+H  slowly rising pitch accent

• The falling intonation at the end matches the indirect (command) act.
• Direct act: question
• Indirect act: assertion

• Did I tell you that I have a new job?
  L+H* !H* !H* L*LL%

• Didja know that he just had a bypass?
  H* !H* L+H* H*LL%

L+H*: steeply rising pitch accent

• Again, the falling intonation at the end matches the indirect (assertion) act
Declarative Questions

• **He has** a **BMW?**
  
  H*  !H*  L*HH%

• **A:** Mom and dad won't have black.
  **B:** They don’t **want** black?
  
  L*  H*HH%

• Again, the rising intonation at the end matches the indirect (question) act, but these are syntactically declarative sentences.
Christine Gunlogson 2001

• Declarative questions are still essentially declarative.

• True to Form: Rising and Falling Declaratives as Questions in English. University of California Santa Cruz doctoral dissertation.
  a. Is it raining? Rising Interrogative
  b. It’s raining? Rising Declarative
  c. It’s raining. Falling Declarative

• Contextual Bias Condition: Rising declaratives can only be used as questions in contexts where the addressee is already publicly committed to the proposition expressed.
Declaratives [rising or falling] express a bias that is absent with the use of interrogatives; they cannot be used as neutral questions.

1. [on a tax form]
   a. During the tax year, did you receive a distribution from a foreign trust?
   b. #During the tax year, you received a distribution from a foreign trust?
   c. #During the tax year, you received a distribution from a foreign trust.

2. [To a coworker eating a piece of fruit. Out of the blue: without any preceding discussion of persimmons]
   a. Is that a persimmon?
   b. #That’s a persimmon?
   c. #That’s a persimmon.
• Rising declaratives, like interrogatives, fail to commit the speaker to their content.
• Falling declaratives do commit the speaker to their propositional content.

(3) A: The King of France is bald.
   B’s response:
   a. Is France a monarchy?
   b. France is a monarchy?
   c. #France is a monarchy.

B had thought that France is a republic.
A rising declarative can be used to express speaker skepticism:

(4) [A&B are looking at co-worker’s much-dented car]
   A: His driving has gotten a lot better.
   B’s response:
   a. Has it? I don’t see much evidence of that.
   b. It has? I don’t see much evidence of that.
   c. #It has. I don’t see much evidence of that.

But the speaker doesn’t have to be skeptical:

(5) A: That copier is broken.
   B’s response:
   a. Is it? Thanks, I’ll use a different one.
   b. It is? Thanks, I’ll use a different one.
   c. (Oh), it is. Thanks I’ll use a different one.
• Rising declaratives as statements: “Uptalk”
• The rising declarative still has the property of non-neutrality, which interrogatives lack.

(6)  a. #Is my name Carl? Will I be your waiter tonight?
    
      b. My name is Carl? I’ll be your waiter tonight?
    
      c. My name is Carl. I’ll be your waiter tonight.

• But here, the speaker does seem to be committed to the content.
  – How to account for the meaning of this intonation is still a mystery in semantics/pragmatics.
  – The Contextual Bias Condition is violated: These cannot be used as questions because the addressee is not publicly committed to the propositional content.
  – Perhaps that’s how we figure out that these are not questions.
Topic and Focus

- One area of pragmatics which is closely related to semantics concerns the ways in which speakers can indicate how what they are saying fits into the larger conversation: the *information structure* of the utterance.

- **Topic**: what the sentence is about:
  - As for John, he’s waiting in the next room.
  - Japanese topic marker *wa*:
    - *Jon wa kafe de onna-no-hito ni aimashita*
      - John TOP café at woman to met
    - *Kanojo wa pianisuto deshita.*
      - She TOP pianist was.
    - ‘John met a woman at a café. She was a pianist.’
• **Focus:** the new information conveyed about the topic
  – Focus creates presuppositions:
    • MARY likes Joe.
      – Presupposes that somebody likes Joe. (c.f. MARY doesn’t like Joe, Does MARY like Joe?)
    • Mary likes JOE.
      – Presupposes that Mary likes somebody.
  – Focus can affect truth conditions (Rooth 1985)
    • Mary only introduced BILL to Sue.
      Mary only introduced Bill to SUE.
    • I only eat FISH.
      – Entails that I don’t eat beef, chicken, lamb, pork, etc.
      I only EAT fish.
      – Entails that I don’t catch fish, train fish, study fish, etc.
  – Focus tells us how a sentence fits into its larger context:
    • Who went to the party? Where did Max go?
      MAX went to the party. Max went to the PARTY
      #Max went to the PARTY #MAX went to the party.
Rooth: The essential meaning of focus is to indicate that what the speaker said is drawn from a contextually relevant set of possibilities that he or she might have said. Focus evokes a set of *alternatives* to the focus: C.

\[ I \text{ eat FISH} \]

Ordinary semantic value \([ \ldots ]^o\)

- I eat fish

Focus semantic value \([ \ldots ]^f\)

- \{I eat beef, I eat chicken, I eat lamb, I eat pork, I eat fish\}

“I only eat FISH”: This is the only true one out of these.
Focus Sensitive Particles

• I only eat FISH.
  – Presupposes that I eat fish.
  – Entails that I don’t eat other members of C: beef, chicken, lamb, or pork.

• I also eat PORK.
  – Presupposes that I eat some member of C other than pork.
  – Entails that I eat pork.

• I even eat PORK.
  – Presupposes that pork is the least likely member of C that I would eat.
  – Entails that I eat pork.
  – Implicates that I eat chicken, beef, lamb and fish. (Hedberg)
Question-Answer Congruence

- **Hamblin 1973**: The meaning of a question is the set of its possible answers.
- **Rooth 1992**: The ordinary semantic value of the question must be a subset of the focus semantic value of the answer.

  - Q1: Which person saw Mary?
    - \([\text{Which person saw Mary?}]^o = \{\text{Fred saw Mary, Nancy saw Mary, Bill saw Mary, Sue saw Mary}\}\)
    
    A1: BILL saw Mary.
    - \([\text{BILL saw Mary}]^f = \{\text{Fred saw Mary, Nancy saw Mary, Bill saw Mary, Sue saw Mary, Nicky saw Mary, Fido saw Mary}\}\)

  - Q2: Which person did Bill see?
    - \([\text{Which person did Bill see?}]^o = \{\text{Bill saw Fred, Bill saw Nancy, Bill saw Mary, Bill saw Sue}\}\)
    
    A2: Bill saw MARY.
    - \([\text{Bill saw MARY}]^f = \{\text{Bill saw Fred, Bill saw Nancy, Bill saw Mary, Bill saw Sue, Bill saw Nicky, Bill saw Fido}\}\)
Rising Wh-Questions
(Hedberg & Mameni 2010)

• Wh-questions are normally falling in intonation, e.g., those used to request elaborative detail:

(1) [ S has been speaking regarding a pending settlement] S: You know on the uh you're sitting on the steps waiting for the judge and that's when they settle you know. H: yeah. wh- when when **when** are you going to court? H* !H* H*LL%

• 18% of wh-questions in a corpus study were rising instead of falling. Why are such questions used?
• Clarification questions (e.g. echo questions) tend to be rising.

(2) A: V S C H E M A at dot H I T C

B: **What’s** after the **dot**?

L+H* L*HH%

(3) **Which** did you say you **preferred**?

H* L*HH%
• Rising and Falling questions can have different discourse effects:

(3) A: Where did you visit?
   B: I visited Tokyo.
   A: Where did you visit?↑
   B: I visited Tokyo.

(4) A: Where did you visit?
   B: I visited Tokyo.
   A: Where did you visit?↓
   B: I visited the Imperial Palace.
• Our proposal:
  – The denotation of a question is the set of its possible answers (Hamblin 1973)
  – The rise on the wh-question indicates that the speaker is partially informed.
  – The rise indicates that the speaker is contemplating a restricted set of alternative answers
• In echo questions, the hearer has extracted some information from what the speaker said.

• (5) A: I visited Tokyo.
   B: Where did you visit?
   A: London.
   B: That’s not what you said!
• Rising reminder questions also involve the speaker having partial information.

(5) A: Did you hear? We have a new department secretary.
   B: Yeah, I heard. What’s her name?↑
   A: Gina.
   B: No, that’s not it. It starts with an S.

(6) A: Did you hear? We have a new department secretary.
   B: Yeah, I heard. What’s her name?↓
   A: Gina.
   B: #No, that’s not it. It starts with an S.
• The restriction on the information doesn’t have to ‘look back’ to a prior utterance:

(5) [Professor F meets Sue, a former York psychology student, for the very first time. 
Sue:  I did my BA at York.
[A few minutes later] 
Prof:  **Who** did you **work** with at York?

• The professor conversationally implicates that he is familiar with the psychology faculty at York.
• Hence the set of possible answers is restricted.
(6) [Professor Hedberg has just finished talking to a student in her office]

• Prof: *What’s your name?*

• The professor conversationally implicates that she used to know the name but has forgotten it, or has in mind a restricted set of names—the ones that she’s seen on the class list and on assignments and exams.
Descriptives and Expressives

• Christopher Potts 2005
  – Sometimes we express two messages at the same time:
    • *That idiot Kaplan got promoted*:
      – Descriptive content: Kaplan got promoted
      – Expressive content: Kaplan is an idiot.
    • The descriptive proposition may be true even if I don’t really think that Kaplan is an idiot.
      – Truth conditions of the two propositions are independent
      – <T,T>, <T, F>, <F,T>,<F, F>
Descriptives and Expressives (cont.)

• “Conventional Implicatures”
  – The same thing is true with non-restrictive relative clauses.
    • *The President of the United States, whom I talked about last week, is giving a speech tonight.*
      – Even if I didn’t talk about him last week, this sentence is true if he is giving a speech tonight.
    • The content of the sentence may be true even if the conventional implicature is false.

• Cf the lecture on expressives by David Kaplan
  – Youtube: *On the Meaning of ouch and oops.*