Introduction to Pragmatics

Summer 2016
Tuesdays 2:30--4:00pm @ 2321.HS 3H

INSTRUCTOR
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Announcements

• The link to the readings is now available on the course website:

https://todorkoev.weebly.com
→ Teaching
→ Reading

• Office hours:
  o Office hours start this week!
  o Please notice that Sections 1, 2 and 7 have swapped times/locations.
What is pragmatics?

- Easier if we first ask: *What is semantics?*
- **Semantics**: The study of linguistic meaning.
- More precisely: linguistic meaning that ...
  - is “literal”
  - is conventional / lexically determined
  - is not context-dependent
  - decides between truth and falsity
  - can be looked up in a dictionary
  - …

- Is semantics all that there is to meaning?
- No: Meaning goes way beyond truth conditions!
So what is pragmatics?

- **Pragmatics**: “The study of linguistic meaning as arising in context.”

- Different authors have expressed this same idea in different ways.
The “waste basket” idea

- Pragmatics is meaning that is not semantics.

- **Gazdar 1979**: “Pragmatics = Meaning – Truth Conditions”

- This is a purely *negative* definition of pragmatics.
The context idea

• Stalnaker 1970:  “Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed.”

• Kempson 1988:  “Pragmatics provides an account of how sentences are used in utterances to convey information in context.”
Afterthoughts

• Coming up with a definition of “pragmatics” (or any other scientific field) is not the most rewarding job ever.
• The divide between semantics and pragmatics is often a matter of how the field developed, not a matter of following a particular definition.
• What is important to us: We will study a range of meaning phenomena which are typically thought of as “pragmatic”.
Pragmatics & logic

• The **formalist view**: Logic is an adequate tool for studying pragmatics.
• The **antiformalist view**: Tools of logic are hopelessly inadequate for capturing natural language in all of its complexity and glory.
• We will side with the former view in this class.
• Main challenge: Demonstrate that there is a “logic” beyond the prima facie “messy” pragmatic phenomena.
Phenomena we will study

- Conversational implicature
- Presupposition
- Conventional implicature
- Reference
- Utterances & discourses
Conversational implicature

• Utterances often give rise to meanings that are richer/stronger/more informative than what is literally said.

(1) David is quite well. He likes his colleagues and he hasn’t been to prison yet.
    ⇒ David is likely to get in trouble with the law.

• Such inferences are called conversational implicatures.
• Typically explained by factoring in certain rules of rational conversation that interlocutors follow.
• Q: Which conversational rule do you think explains the inference in (1)?
Presupposition

- Other sentences require that certain things hold / have already been accepted in discourse.

(2) The British Queen has several palaces.  
   ⇒ Britain has a Queen.

(3) Putin regrets invading Crimea.  
    ⇒ Putin invaded Crimea.

- The above inferences are called presuppositions.
- If you don’t believe the presupposition, you will most probably reject the entire sentence.
- Q: Which words in (2)-(3) trigger the presupposed inference?
Conventional implicatures

- Other pragmatic inferences are not necessarily presupposed and can introduce new information.
- However, they are felt to be secondary to the main point the sentence makes.

(4) Queen Elizabeth, who has several palaces, will soon retire.
   ⇒ Queen Elizabeth has several palaces.
(5) Putin, the invader of Crimea, is in love with Alina.
   ⇒ Putin invaded Crimea.

- Such inferences are known conventional implicatures.
- Q: What are the underlined phrases called?
The difference between definite vs. indefinite NPs makes a huge difference in meaning.

(6) Kevin to Jessica: I saw a movie last night.
    I saw the movie last night.

- The use of “a movie” suggests that Kevin is talking about a movie that Jessica is not familiar with.
- The use of “the movie” suggests the opposite: that Jessica knows which movie Kevin is talking about.
- Q: What would you call those two types of inferences?
• The reference of certain expressions is rigid, i.e. it is not influenced by syntactic environment.

(7) *I* am teaching *now*.
(8) John said that *I* am teaching *now*.

• “*I*” = the current speaker, “*now*” = the current time
• Such expressions are called **indexical expressions**.
• Q: What would be an indexical that always refers to the current place/location?
• Q: Is there in English/German an indexical for “the current year”?
Utterances & discourses

- Human communication consists of discourses.
- Discourses consist of utterances.
- Utterances can perform different speech acts: statements, questions, commands, promises, etc.
- Different speech acts can share the same descriptive content.

(9) The final exam will be multiple choice.
(10) Will the final exam be multiple choice?

- The two sentences above perform different acts but use the exact same words!
Utterances & discourses cont’d

- Utterances inside discourses are structured by **coherence relations** (e.g. Explanation, Result, Narration, etc.)
- Coherence relations glue together different clauses and sentences into a coherent whole.

(11) John took a train from Paris to Istanbul. He has relatives there. ($\Rightarrow$ Explanation)

(12) John went to the market. He likes spinach.  
     ($\Rightarrow$ Explanation)

(13) John took a train from Paris to Istanbul. He likes spinach. (difficult to infer a coherence relation)
The following buzzwords were mentioned today in class or come from the assigned reading.

Try to describe what each word means in "very informal terms".

- conversational implicature
- propositional attitude
- presupposition
- conversational maxim
- common ground
- semantic content
- indexical expression
- demonstrative expression
- indefinite noun phrase
- illocutionary act, speech act
Reading for next time

- “Implication relations” (found on Dropbox)