

Linguistics 103

Language Structure and Verbal Art

Entailment and Presupposition vs. Implicature

Entailment

A sentence S **entails** a proposition P if P is true whenever S is true.

- (1) a. Hilda ate apples and bananas.
entails
Hilda ate apples.

because,

if Hilda ate apples and bananas, then,
necessary, Hilda ate apples =

if Hilda ate apples and bananas, then it cannot be
that Hilda did not eat apples.

- b. All cows eat grass and Bossie is a cow.
entails
Bossie eats grass.

because,

if all cows eat grass and Bossie is a cow,
then, necessarily, Bossie eats grass =

if all cows eat grass and Bossie is a cow, then it
cannot be that Bossie does not eat grass.

Presupposition

A sentence S presupposes a proposition P if the truth of P is assumed by the speaker in order for S to be appropriate in a discourse.

- (2) a. Why did you steal the money?
presupposes
You stole the money.
- a.' You did not steal the money.
Why did you steal the money?
- # means 'bizarre' or 'inappropriate'
- b. Hortense burst into tears again.
presupposes
Hortense burst into tears once before.
- b.' Hortense has never burst into tears.
Hortense burst into tears again.
- c. The King of France is bald
presupposes
There is a King of France.
- There is no King of France.
The King of France is bald.
- d. Stop bothering me!
presupposes
You are bothering me.
- You are not bothering me.
Stop bothering me!

Presuppositions can exist with all sorts of utterance types (questions, commands, statements, performatives)

but

entailments exist only with utterances that express propositions.

Implicatures

Implicatures are inferences about the world that a hearer draws owing to assumptions about the presumed intentions of the speaker.

Many implicatures arise from the presumption of conversational cooperativeness, described by Grice in the Maxims.

Implicatures differ from presuppositions and entailments because they can be **cancelled**.

(3) S: Hortense made three pumpkin pies for Thanksgiving dinner.

implicates

I: Hortense made *no more than* three pumpkin pies for Thanksgiving dinner.

S does not presuppose I. It is not necessary for the interlocutors to assume I in order for S to be appropriately uttered.

S does not, in fact, entail I either. This can be shown by 'cancelling' the implicature:

Cancellation:

Hortense made three pumpkin pies for Thanksgiving dinner; in fact, she made four!!

Since making four pies entails having made (at least) 3 pies, there is no *logical* contradiction here.

However, a speaker uttering S in a context in which Hortense actually made 4 pies is not being entirely *cooperative*, because they are not telling all that they know that may be presumed to be relevant under the circumstances.

Jokes and Speech Act Theory

Humor is a universal characteristic of humanity. Jokes represent a specific type of humorous performance and can be approached in several ways:

- (1) **speech act:** telling a joke is doing something
 - narrative:** anecdotal jokes 'report' a story
 - social function:** jokes have social context and function

In our literate society, jokes (along with song lyrics, children's tales, and television/movie narratives) form part of the unwritten verbal art culture. Everyone knows some jokes, and many people know many jokes, but few people write down the jokes they know.

As speech acts, jokes normally **report** information (fictional or otherwise), in this sense jokes **tell** something.

- (2) a. tell a story
 - *pronounce a story
 - *give a story
- b. give a prayer
 - pray a prayer
 - *tell a prayer
- c. pronounce a verdict
 - *tell a verdict
- d. cast a magic spell
 - *tell a magic spell
- e. offer/give an apology
 - *tell an apology
- f. tell a joke
 - *give a joke
 - ? joke a joke

But the principal function of a joke is **to be funny, to amuse**, and not to report a story.

Jokes as speech acts

Recall that performative speech acts require a number of language-external circumstances in order to qualify as **felicitous**.

I bet you a dollar it won't rain tomorrow!

- (5) Requirements for a felicitous bet:
- (a) an interlocutor (need someone to bet **with**)
 - (b) a cultural convention establishing that this assertion has the force of a bet
 - (c) completion of the betting performance: *Deal!* or similar.
 - (d) sincere intentions on the part of the bettor and interlocutor
 - (e) subsequent 'making good on' the bet (tomorrow)
- (6) Jokes like other speech acts have **conditions of felicity**. In other words, what does it take for a joke to be **funny**?
- (a) an interlocutor (does one tell jokes to oneself?)
 - (b) there is a joke text (can't tell a joke without a joke to tell)
 - (c) the situation has sufficient **predispositions** for humor:
the hearer *expects and is willing to be entertained*
 - (d) the joke performance is completed
 - (e) interlocutor has cultural knowledge needed to interpret the joke
- (7) Positive **predispositions** for the humor situation and 'release of comic pleasure' (Freud 1905)
- a. Hearer is in a cheerful mood
 - b. Hearer **expects** the comic (cf. nightclub vs. funeral)
 - c. Hearer attention (no distracting mental activities)
 - d. Superficiality of analysis
 - e. Superficiality of affect
 - f. Any other pleasurable context.
- Hearer must be willing to be entertained.

A: *What do they make baby powder from? Pulverized babies from drought-ridden countries!*

B (Peace Corps worker): *Umm ... that's really not very funny.*

Acceptance of the 'humorous situation' is akin to acceptance of the 'conversational situation'.

Jokes and the Gricean maxims

According to the Cooperative Principle, participants in a conversation obey certain tacit conventions

These conventions then exert an important influence on determining the **conveyed** information of utterances (as opposed to the information of a 'literal' reported information).

Hearers try to make sense of what they hear because they **automatically** assume **that there is sense to be made.**

When a hearer suspects that maxim has been disobeyed there are several possible responses:

- (7) a. attempt to reconcile utterance with the maxims
- b. accept that a maxim has been violated:
conclude that interlocutor is being **uncooperative**,
then attempt to determine how they are being uncooperative:
 - i. **joke** ('You're kidding me!')
 - ii. **lying** ('Don't lie to me!')
 - iii. **evasion** ('Get to the point!')
 - iv. **disability** ('Hmm. They must be crazy')

The **joke** response is the most socially innocuous interpretation of uncooperativeness: *You must be joking!*

Unintentional jokes

A speaker may be engaging in **bona-fide** conversation, but the hearer, owing to strong positive predispositions for the humorous situation, takes the utterance as a joke:

- (8) *You work three jobs? ... Uniquely American, isn't it? I mean, that is fantastic that you're doing that.*
— George W. Bush, to a divorced mother of 3, Omaha, Feb. 4, 2005
- (9) *I took a city that was known for pornography and licked it to a large extent, so I have my own set of qualifications.*
— Rudolf Giuliani commenting on successful campaigning during the Republican New Hampshire primary (2008):

Sarcasm

A deliberate manipulation of the ambiguities inherent in bona-fide and non-bona-fide communication.

Surprise and the punch-line: deceiving the listener

'Always give 'em something, but never give 'em all you got or they won't keep comin' back for more ...' — traditional piece of advice

Jokes almost invariably involve an element of **surprise**.

The surprise comes with the **punch-line**.

Thus, we can see jokes a kind of linguistic **coercion**: the hearer is led to believe one thing and then has this belief suddenly modified.

If there were no coercion, there would be no joke: the listener already knows the joke.

Jokes **fool** the listener temporarily, then **unfool** the listener.

The interlocutor's willingness to enjoy 'being fooled' is a felicity condition for a joke performance.

Bette Midler:

So my husband says to me,
'Why don't you ever tell me when your having an orgasm?'

And I said, 'Cuz you're never **around**, why bother?'

Deception of the listener can take place at several linguistic levels:

- a. Puns: deception involves interpretation of lexical or syntactic ambiguities
- b. Conceptual 'world-semantic' level or **script overlap**: listener falsely assumes 'ordinary' narrative situation
- c. Conversational maxim manipulation: listener falsely assumes 'ordinary' conversational cooperativeness.

In an ordinary **narrative** the listener remains ignorant of the resolution of the complicating action until the 'end of the story' is revealed.

A narrative may or may not contain **deception** (cf. mystery novel).

In this way, a narrative involves a more complex type of linguistic coercion. Where coercion is extreme we talk of **suspense**.

Puns

Lexical. The ordinary 'lexical' pun deceives the listener through ambiguities inherent in the meaning of a single word.

What's the first thing that usually strikes a first-time visitor to New York? A speeding taxi!

Syntactic. This type of pun doesn't involve two different senses of a single word, but rather takes advantage of differences of meaning that arise from ambiguities in sentence structure

These are called **garden-path** sentences, because the listener misanalyzes the syntactic structure of the expression, and in this way gets 'led down the garden path' to the wrong interpretation

Flying airplanes can be dangerous (Chomsky 1957)

Maintenance complaints by US Air Force pilots, with responses by maintenance crews:

A: *Left inside main tire almost needs replacement.*
B: *Almost replaced left inside main tire.*

A: *Something loose in cockpit.*
B: *Something tightened in cockpit.*

A: *DME volume unbelievably loud.*
B: *Volume set to more believable level.*

Scripts and script overlap

The set of assumptions made by the hearer suddenly switches to another set of assumptions.

The conventionalized sets of assumptions that are brought to mind by a particular (mini-narrative) can be called **scripts**.

Many jokes usually involve some degree of **script** overlap: the text of the joke is compatible with more than one script.

(11) A: *'Doctor, you've got to help me. I can't get an erection.'*

B: *'Whats a matter? Did you come here to fuck?'*

(12) *Guest enters a room at a party, lights cigarette. Host enters, looks disapprovingly at the smoker, and says:*

'I'm so sorry, I don't think you can smoke in here. I don't have a single ashtray in the whole house!'

Guest responds: 'Don't worry! Your carpet will do just fine.'

(13) Paul Lynde on Hollywood Squares:

A: *What's the first question children usually ask their parents about sex?*

B: *When am I gonna **get some**?*

(14) Paul Lynde on Hollywood Squares:

A: *Why do motorcycle gang members always wear leather?*

B: *Hmm ... because chiffon **wrinkles!***

(15) 2004 Election Joke:

Ralph Nader, John Kerry and George Bush are all on a jet.

Nader opens the hatch, throws out 100 one dollar bills, and says, 'I just made 100 people happy!'

So then Bush opens the hatch and throws out a thousand one dollar bills, and says, 'That's nothin' I just made a thousand people happy!'

So not to be outdone, John Kerry opens the hatch and throws Bush out of the plane and says, 'Look, I just made the whole world happy!'

Gricean violations in jokes

- Which maxims are violated in the following?

A: *A lobster bit off my toe!*

B: *Which one?*

A: *What do you mean, which one?*

Who can tell one lobster from another?

How do you make a small fortune in Israel?

Come with a large one.

Herman: *What do you think Grandpa, will it be a boy or a girl?*

Grandpa: *Probably.*

Customer: *Hello, I'm calling from 36th and Spruce. Can you tell me where the nearest MAC machine is?*

Bank: *18th and Walnut.*

Customer: *You mean there's no MAC machine in West Philadelphia?!*

Bank: *Oh! You mean nearest to YOU!*

Tourist: *Have you lived in Maine all your life?*

Mainer: *Not yet.*

(more maintenance reports)

A: *Evidence of hydraulic leak on right main landing gear.*

B: *Evidence removed.*

A: *Dead bugs on windshield.*

B: *Live bugs on order.*

Three Traditional Yiddish Jokes

The rabbi and the student

The rabbi counseled a young would-be scholar:

'My son, the time of youth is one of ideals, passions, dreams, hopes. And that is as it should be. But life also has its cold realities. If you decide to dedicate yourself to studying the Torah, you must expect to suffer privation and hunger. And loneliness, too, for study is the loneliest labor of all. So if you must study, then resign yourself to misery until you are 50.'

'And when I'm 50, what then?' asked the student hopefully.

'Why, by then you'll be used to it.'

The villager of Chelm

A villager of Chelm asked his landsmen a riddle.

'What's purple, hangs on the wall, and whistles?'

When everyone gave up, he proudly gave the answer:

'A herring.'

'A HERRING?' people exclaimed.

'But a herring isn't purple!'

'Well,' replied the man, 'THIS herring was painted purple.'

'But who ever heard of a herring hanging on the wall?'

'Aha! THIS herring was hung on the wall!'

'But since when does a herring whistle?' yelled the crowd, to which the man replied, 'OK, so it doesn't whistle.'

The telegram

A man's father was dying, so he decided to send a telegram to his brother in America:

DEAREST MOYSHE, FATHER IS VERY SICK, MAY DIE SOON, COME HOME IMMEDIATELY. YOUR BROTHER, SHLOYME.

At the telegraph office, however, Moyshe learned that his 15-word telegram would cost 150 grushn, too much money, so he re-read the telegram.

'DEAREST MOYSHE ... What do I need that for? If he gets it, he'll KNOW it's for him.

... MAY DIE SOON... What do I need that for? If he gets a telegram saying that Father is very sick, he'll KNOW it means he may die soon...

YOUR BROTHER, SHLOYME ... Why write my name? How many brothers does he have?

OK, make it: 'FATHER IS VERY SICK, COME HOME IMMEDIATELY. YOUR BROTHER.'

The telegram was now nine words, but 90 grushn was still steep for the poor man, so he continued to edit.

'... COME HOME IMMEDIATELY ... What do I need that for? If he hears our father is very sick, he'll KNOW to come right home.

... YOUR BROTHER ... What do I need that for? Who SHOULD be sending him a telegram that our father is very sick if not me, his brother?

OK, make it: 'FATHER IS VERY SICK.'

The price was now 40 grushn, still a tidy sum. The poor man re-read the message one final time and realized how silly he was.

'Oy am I a fool! FATHER IS VERY SICK — Why ELSE would I be sending him a telegram??? OK, scratch that out.'

And he went back home, pleased with having saved all his money.

Question: Why do listeners enjoy being 'fooled' and 'unfooled'?

To answer the question of why jokes are enjoyable, we have to look at the **social function of jokes**, which are various and complex.

Ridicule of the out-group: establish in-group status

Indirect expression of hostility or superiority

Self-disparagement: indirect expression of inferiority

'Private joke'

Duel of wits

a. i. *Who was that gentleman I saw you with last night?
That was no gentleman, that was my senator.*

ii. Truman Capote speaking of Jack Kerouac:
*That's not writing, that's **typing!***

b. i. Yiddish joke:
*Why did God make **goyim**?
Well, **somebody** has to buy retail!*

ii. Mexican joke:
*Los mexicanos tienen los aztecas, los peruanos tienen
los incas. ¿Que tienen los argentinos?
Los barcos.*

(Mexicans have the Aztecs, Peruvians have the Incas. What do
Argentines have? Boats.)

iii. U Penn joke:
*Why did the student at Brown cross the road?
It was the only requirement for graduation.*

c. Riddle:
When is a joke not a joke? Usually.