

# Linguistics 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art Pragmatics and Speech Act Theory

## Semantics versus Pragmatics

### **semantics:**

branch of linguistics concerned with **the meanings of propositions**

### **pragmatics:**

branch of linguistics concerned with

- **the use and function** of language;
- the **relation between** the **structural properties** of an utterance and its **deployment and reception** by language users

Traditionally, **meaning** has been studied by examining those sentences which express **propositions** which have a **truth-value**.

- (1) *Snow is white.*  
*The cat is on the mat.*

Semantics is concerned with the conditions under which the proposition expressed by a sentence is true. These are said to be its **truth-conditions**.

- (2) '*Snow is white*' is True if and only if snow is white.  
'*The cat is on the mat*' is True iff the cat is on the mat.

### **object language:**

language in which sentences subject to study are expressed

### **metalanguage:**

language in which the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed by the sentence are expressed

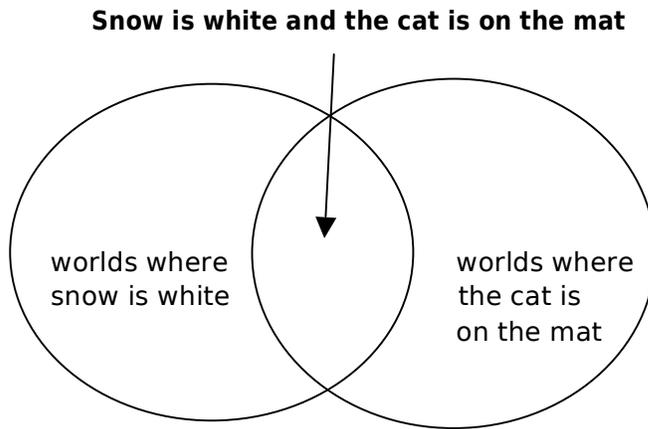
- (3) '*Schnee ist weiss*' is True if and only if snow is white.  
'*La neige est blanche*' is True if and only if snow is white.

The study of the truth-conditions of propositions has a long history in linguistics and logic.

One way to talk about **truth-conditions** is to imagine an infinite number of 'possible worlds' where different **states-of-affairs** hold true. A (**true-false**) proposition picks out the set of worlds in which the proposition is true.

This way of conceptualizing meaning then permits certain logical relations to be defined mathematically in terms of set theory.

For example, two propositions linked by **and** can be taken to refer to the **intersection** of the worlds defined by each proposition alone:



But there are a great many utterances which

a. **do not have propositional content**

or

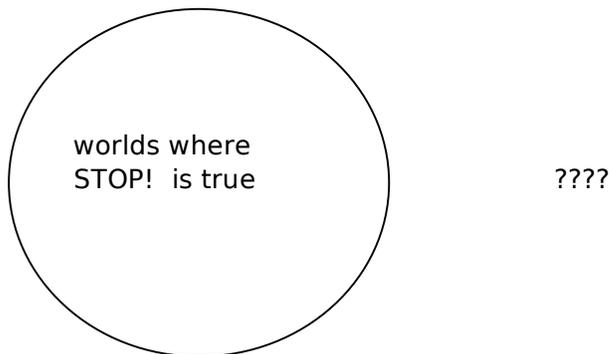
b. whose propositional content is distinct from their **conveyed meaning** in some or many of their occurrences

A simple example is an imperative:

(5) **STOP!**

Is it possible to talk about whether an imperative is *true* or *false*?

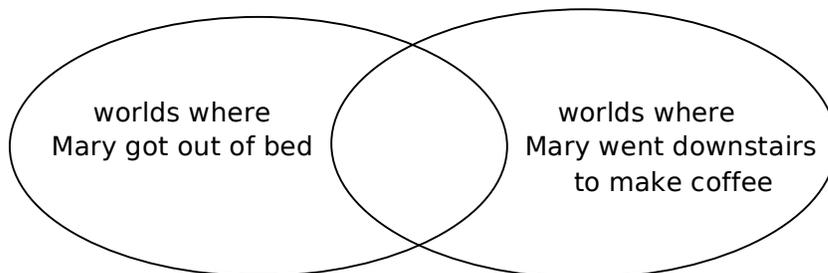
What then does an imperative 'mean', if meaning is defined as a function which picks out the worlds in which the proposition conveyed by the expression is true?



Even with a word as simple and seemingly logical as **and** problems arise:

(6) Mary got out of bed and went downstairs to make coffee.

Is this proposition of this sentence true even if Mary went downstairs to make coffee and **then** got out of bed?



**Pragmatics** is the branch of linguistics concerned with how the 'meaning' of an utterance depends on the circumstances in which it is uttered — how people **use** linguistic actions.

## Speech Acts

JL Austin drew attention to the fact that not all linguistic expressions are used to convey propositions, that is, not all expressions directly **assert** something.

Rather, many linguistic expressions have a different use:

**in the saying of them, the speaker does something.**

This observation led to the study of **speech-acts**.

- (4) I dub thee knight.  
I do take thee to be my lawfully wedded wife.  
I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth* (smashing champagne bottle)  
I bet you a dollar it will rain tomorrow.  
I hereby bequeath my fortune to be divided equally among my children.

Such utterances are said to be **performative**.

A **performative speech act** involves **doing** something with words, rather than **reporting** something.

## Infelicity vs. Truth Value

A performative speech act is not in and of itself sufficient to **accomplish the act** associated with it.

Certain external **circumstances** must also obtain, as in a wedding.

The concept of a **truth-value for a performative utterance** is quite complicated:

(5) John says, 'I promise you I will turn my work in tomorrow'.

Under what conditions is John's utterance **false**?

If it is not false, then how do we characterize John's utterance if indeed he (i) fails to fulfill his promise or (ii) is lying when he says 'I promise'?

Austin proposed various circumstances required for a performative utterance to be **felicitous** ('happy', as opposed to 'true'):

- (6) a. **accepted conventional procedure** attached to the utterance  
b. **circumstances and participants appropriate**  
c. **correct execution** of the procedure  
d. **complete execution** of the procedure  
e. participant **sincerity**  
f. participants **behave in the future according to the intentions** presupposed for sincere expression in this context

If conditions in (6) are not met the utterance is said to be **infelicitous**.

- (7) **Various causes of Infelicity**  
a. **misfire**: act purported but void (fails conditions 6a-d)  
b. **abuse**: act professed but hollow (fails conditions 6e-d)  
c. **misinvocation**: act disallowed (failed conditions 6a-b)  
d. **misexecution**: act has flaws or hitches (fails conditions 6c-d)

Propositions with nonexistent referents:

(8) *The King of France is bald.*

Some more examples of performatives:

- (9) a. *I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee.*
- b. *I congratulate you.*
- c. *I challenge you to a duel.*
- d. *The United States does hereby declare war on Japan.*
- e. *I urge you to vote yes on the reform bill.*
- f. *We the jury do find the defendant guilty of murder.*
- g. *I'm sorry.*

## Presupposition, Implication and Felicity Conditions

(10) *All Jack's children are blonde.*

**Presupposes:** Jack has children.

*Jack's children are blonde but Jack has no children.*

(11) *Jack has two children.*

**Implies:** Jack has only two children.

But this is not an **entailment** since it is **not true** that if Jack has three children then he doesn't have two.

*Jack has two children; in fact, he has three.*

## Explicit vs. Primary Performatives

(12) **Explicit performance**

*I apologize.*

*I approve.*

*Aye. Nay.*

*I bid you welcome.*

(13) **Half performance, half description**

*I am sorry.*

*I approve of that decision.*

*I welcome you.*

(14) **Descriptive**

*I am disgusted by your behavior.*

*I feel approval for that idea.*

(15) a. 'But did s/he **really?**'

b. Could the speaker **do the action without uttering** the performative?

c. Could the speaker do the performative deliberately?

d. Felicity vs. Truth-Conditional Value:

Could the utterance be literally false (as opposed to insincere?)

# Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary Acts

Different **uses** of a speech act:

**locutionary:**

utterance conveys a proposition with ordinary 'meaning'

**illocutionary:** informing, ordering, warning, undertaking:

utterance has a certain conventional **force**.

**perlocutionary:** utterance brings about or achieves a state of affairs  
in the saying of it

## Conversational Cooperativeness

**H P Grice** 'Logic and conversation'

**Cooperative Principle:**

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The Gricean **conversational maxims:**

**1. Quantity:**

Make your contribution as informative and no more informative than required for the current purposes of the exchange.

**2. Quality:**

- a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**3. Relevance:**

- a. Be relevant. (This is intentionally vague.)

**4. Be perspicuous.**

- a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
- b. Avoid ambiguity.
- c. Be brief — avoid unnecessary prolixity.
- d. Be orderly.

## Implicature

The expectation that your interlocutor is obeying the Gricean maxims makes departures from them introduce **implicatures**:

- (16) A: *How is Bill getting along in his job?*  
B: *Oh very well, I think. He likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.*
- (17) A: *Jane doesn't seem to have a boyfriend these days.*  
B: *She's been going to New York a lot lately.*
- (18) A: *I ran out of gas.*  
B: *There is a gas station around the corner.*
- (19) **Tautology**: an assertion which is, logically, necessarily true.  
a. *A rose is a rose is a rose.*  
b. *That is the sort of thing that people who like that sort of thing like.*
- (20) **Vagueness**  
*That is some baby.*
- (22) **Metaphor**  
*You are the sunshine of my life.*
- (23) **Understatement; Hyperbole**  
*Yeah, he was just a little drunk last night.*  
*I mean, the whole freshman class was there.*
- (25) **Prolixity**  
*The soprano produced a series of sound that corresponded closely with the score of 'Home Sweet Home'.*