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Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how language is affected by the context in which it occurs: for example, the relationship between the speakers in a conversation or the immediately preceding utterances in a text. Pragmatics is distinct from grammar, which is the study of the internal structure of language. (Grammar, in turn, is generally divided into several areas of study: semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology. These areas are covered in Chapters 3–6.) Keeping in mind this distinction between pragmatics (language use) and grammar (language structure), let's consider some observations that we can make about language use and context.

- (1) If Jack says *Kathy's cooking dinner tonight*, and Jill replies with *Better stock up on Alka-Seltzer*, an observer might conclude that Kathy is not a good cook.
- (2) The utterance *I apologize for stepping on your toe* can constitute an act of apology. The utterance *John apologized to Mary for stepping on her toe* cannot.
- (3) The utterance *I now pronounce you husband and wife* can constitute an act of marriage if spoken by an appropriate authority, such as an ordained Catholic priest. If uttered by an 8-year-old child, however, it cannot.
- (4) An appropriate answer to the question *Do you have the time?* might be *7:15*; an inappropriate answer would be *Yes*.
- (5) When a friend says something that you agree with, you might respond by saying *You can say that again*. But it would be inappropriate for your friend to then repeat what he or she originally said.

Observation (1) illustrates the fact that sentences can imply information that is not actually stated. Observation (2) illustrates the fact that we can *do* things by uttering sentences, as well as say things. Observation (3) illustrates the fact that the nature of the participants in a verbal exchange can determine the effect of what is actually said. Observation (4) illustrates the fact that a correct answer to a question is not necessarily appropriate. Observation (5) illustrates the fact that speakers don't always mean exactly what they say.

All of these phenomena are pragmatic in nature. That is, they have to do with the way we use language to communicate in a particular context rather than the way language is struc-

tured internally. Moreover, we will assume that the phenomena in (1–5) are systematic; that is, they are governed by a system of principles. What we will now try to do is construct the system of principles that will account for these phenomena. Keep in mind that what follows is a theory designed to account for the observations in (1–5).

Implicature

In his article "Logic and Conversation," the philosopher Paul Grice (1975) pointed out that an utterance can *imply* a proposition (i.e., a statement) that is not part of the utterance and that does not follow as a necessary consequence of the utterance. Grice called such an implied statement an **implicature**. Consider the following example. John says to his wife, Mary, *Uncle Chester is coming over for dinner tonight*, and Mary responds with *I guess I'd better hide the liquor*. Someone hearing this interchange might draw the inference that Uncle Chester has a drinking problem. In Grice's terms, we might say that Mary's utterance raises the implicature that Uncle Chester has a drinking problem.

There are three important points to note about this example. First, the implicature (Uncle Chester has a drinking problem) is not part of Mary's utterance (*I guess I'd better hide the liquor*). Second, the implicature does not follow as a necessary consequence of Mary's utterance. (A necessary consequence of an utterance is called an **entailment** and will be covered in the chapter on semantics.) Third, it is possible for an utterance to raise more than one implicature, or to raise different implicatures if uttered in different contexts. For example, Mary's response (*I guess I'd better hide the liquor*) might raise the implicature that Uncle Chester is a teetotaler, and that the mere sight of alcohol and its consumption offends him, so Mary is hiding it from his view. Thus, implicatures are heavily dependent upon the context of an utterance, including the participants. However, we have not yet constructed any hypotheses about how these implicatures arise. We will now consider what such a theory might look like.

Conversational Maxims

Grice proposes that conversations are governed by what he calls the Cooperative Principle: the assumption that participants in a conversation are cooperating with each other. This Cooperative Principle, in turn, consists of four **conversational maxims**: Quantity—a participant's contribution should be informative; Quality—a participant's contribution should be true; Relation—a participant's contribution should be relevant; and Manner—a participant's contribution should be clear. Grice's claim, however, is not that we strictly adhere to these maxims when we converse; rather, he claims that we interpret what we hear *as if* it conforms to these maxims. That is, when a maxim is violated, we draw an inference (i.e., an implicature) which makes the utterance conform to these maxims. Grice used the term **flouting** to describe the *intentional* violation of a maxim for the purpose of conveying an unstated proposition. This, then, would constitute a theory of how implicatures arise. Let's now consider how this theory of conversational implicature applies in some hypothetical cases.

Maxim of Quantity. This maxim states that each participant's contribution to a conversation should be no more or less informative than required. Suppose Kenny and Tom are

college roommates. Kenny walks into the living room of their apartment, where Tom is reading a book. Kenny asks Tom, *What are you reading?* Tom responds with *A book*, which raises an implicature. Kenny reasons (unconsciously) as follows: I asked Tom what he was reading, and my question required him to tell me either the title of his book or at least its subject matter. Instead, he told me what I could already see for myself. He appears to be flouting the Maxim of Quantity. There must be a reason that he gave less information than the situation requires. The inference (i.e., the implicature) that I draw is that he does not want to be disturbed, and thus is trying to end the conversation.

Maxim of Quality. This maxim states that each participant's contribution should be truthful and based on sufficient evidence. Suppose an undergraduate in a geography class says, in response to a question from the instructor, *Reno's the capital of Nevada*. The instructor, Mr. Barbados, then says, *Yeah, and London's the capital of New Jersey*. The instructor's utterance raises an implicature. The student reasons (unconsciously) as follows: Mr. Barbados said that London is the capital of New Jersey; he knows that is not true. He appears to be flouting the Maxim of Quality; there must be a reason for him saying something patently false. The inference (i.e., the implicature) I draw is that my answer is false (i.e., Reno is not the capital of Nevada). (This and the next two examples are adapted from Levinson [1983].)

Maxim of Relation. This maxim states that each participant's contribution should be relevant to the subject of the conversation. Suppose a man wakes up in the morning and asks his wife, *What time is it?* She responds with *Well, the paper's already come*. Her statement raises an implicature. The husband reasons (unconsciously) as follows: I asked about the time, and she mentioned something seemingly unrelated—the arrival of the newspaper. She appears to be flouting the Maxim of Relation; there must be some reason for her seemingly irrelevant comment. The inference (i.e., the implicature) I draw is that she doesn't know the exact time, but the arrival of the newspaper has something to do with the time, namely that it is now past the time of day that the newspaper usually comes (i.e., 7:00 A.M.).

Maxim of Manner. This maxim states that each participant's contribution should be expressed in a reasonably clear fashion; that is, it should not be vague, ambiguous, or excessively wordy. Suppose Mr. and Mrs. Jones are out for a Sunday drive with their two preschool children. Mr. Jones says to Mrs. Jones, *Let's stop and get something to eat*. Mrs. Jones responds with *Okay, but not M-c-D-o-n-a-l-d-s*. Mrs. Jones's statement raises an implicature. Mr. Jones reasons (unconsciously) as follows: She spelled out the word *McDonald's*, which is certainly not the clearest way of saying it. She appears to be flouting the Maxim of Manner; there must be a reason for her lack of clarity. Since the kids cannot spell, the inference (i.e., the implicature) I draw is that she does not want the children to understand that part of her statement.

In summary, an implicature is a proposition implied by an utterance, but neither part of nor a logical consequence of that utterance. An implicature arises in the mind of a hearer when the speaker flouts (i.e., intentionally violates) one of the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, or Manner.

Exercise A

1. In the movie *The Doctor*, an orderly is wheeling patient Jack McKee (William Hurt) down a hospital corridor on a gurney. McKee is nearly naked except for a single sheet draped over him. McKee looks up at the orderly and says, *Do you think you could get me a thinner sheet? I'm not sure everybody can see through this one*. McKee's utterance raises an implicature—namely, that he wants more covering. Which of Grice's maxims does McKee flout?
2. Assume that you are teaching a course. A fellow instructor approaches you after you have graded a test and asks, *How did Mr. Jones do?* You respond with *Well, he wrote something down for every question*.
 - a. Which of Grice's maxims does your response appear to flout?
 - b. What is the implicature raised by your response?
- †3. You ask a friend, *Do you know where Billy Bob is?* The friend responds with *Well, he didn't meet me for lunch like he was supposed to*.
 - a. Which of Grice's maxims does your friend's statement appear to flout?
 - b. What is the implicature raised by your friend's statement?
4. In each of the exchanges below, the italicized phrase indicates that the second speaker is trying to avoid violating a conversational maxim (i.e., Quantity, Quality, Relation, or Manner). Name the maxim.
 - a. SERVER: What can I get you?
CUSTOMER: I'll have a chef's salad. Oh, *by the way*, is there a post office nearby?
 - b. JOHN: What happened during your interview today?
MARY: Well, *to make a long story short*, they didn't hire me.
5. Gretchen is married and has two children, ages 7 and 4 years. In a conversation critical of her father-in-law, held in the presence of her children, she referred to her father-in-law as *the first generation* and to her children as *the third generation*.
 - a. Which of Grice's maxims does Gretchen appear to flout?
 - b. What is the implicature raised by Gretchen's utterance?
6. For each of the following exchanges, determine (a) which of Grice's maxims the second speaker's utterance appears to flout, and (b) the implicature raised by the second speaker.
 - a. BOB: Do you want some dessert?
RAY: Do birds have wings?
 - b. DIANE: Don't you think John is a nice guy?
SUSAN: Yeah, he's about as sensitive as Attila the Hun.
 - c. JOHN: Who was that man I saw you with yesterday?
MARY: That was just someone.
 - d. SALES CLERK: Could I have your name?
CUSTOMER: It's K-A-T-H-R-Y-N R-I-L-E-Y.
7. Consider the exchange in Exercise (6d). What implicature would a customer raise by spelling his name if it were *Frank Parker*?

Speech Acts

In his book *How to Do Things with Words*, British philosopher John Austin (1962) had the fundamental insight that an utterance can be used to perform an act. That is, he was the first