

Overview of topics

1. Pragmatics & Context
2. Speech Acts
3. Rules of Conversation

What to remember and understand:

Pragmatics, Types of context (not their names), Direct and indirect speech acts, Conversational maxims (what is it, not their names), Breaking a maxim, Flouting a maxim.

1 Pragmatics & Context

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used and of the effect of context on language.

Several types of **context**:

1. **Physical context** – objects surrounding the communication, place and time of the the communication, what is going on around, etc.
 - (1) a. *I want that book.* accompanied by pointing
 - b. *Be here at 9:00* tonight. place/time reference
2. **Linguistic context** – what has been said before in the conversation.
 - (2) a. *Linda came home late yesterday.* She thought nobody would notice.
 - b. *If my mom heard you talk* like that, ...
3. **Social context** – the social relationship of the people involved in communication.
 - (3) a. To the U.S. President: # *Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home.*
 - b. To your friend: # *I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavor to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs.*
Better: *Call me when you get home.*

Note: In Linguistics, # is used to mark sentences that are semantically or pragmatically odd. They can still be perfectly grammatically correct.

4. **Shared knowledge** – what is known by both speaker and hearer.

2 Speech Acts

speech act – usage of language to accomplish something.

Many types of speech acts: asserting (stating), questioning, ordering, requesting, threatening, confirming, promising, advising, etc.

2.1 Sentence types & their typical usage

Some speech acts are so common they have direct counterparts in **sentence types**:

1. **Declarative sentences** – the “normal” kind of sentence, typically used in **assertions** to convey information, having truth conditions (simply, are true or not).

(4) *Paris is the capital of France.*

2. **Interrogative sentences** – typically used in **requests for information** (questions) to get information from the hearer(s).

(5) *What is the capital of France?*

3. **Imperative sentences** – typically used in **orders** and **requests** for some actions.

(6) *Go to the end of the line!*

2.2 Performative Verbs

Performative verbs – class of verbs which enable us to use declarative sentences for different purpose than simply asserting an information.

- (7)
 - a. *I request that you stop that.*
 - b. *I ask you what does that mean.*
 - c. *I order you to go to your room.*
 - d. *I promise to improve.*
 - e. *I fine you \$100 for possession of oregano.*
 - f. *I nominate Batman for mayor of Gotham City.*
 - g. *I pronounce you man and wife.*

However:

- (8) a. *I advised you well, didn't I?*
b. *He warns me not to drive drunk.*
c. *I promise to sue your pants off if you infringe on my patent.*
d. *I advise you to stay away from my girlfriend.*

2.3 Indirect Speech Acts

- Direct speech acts:
 - typical sentence form (e.g. *interrogative sentence for a question*)
 - performative verb (e.g. *I ask you whether . . .*)
 - Indirect speech acts – the form of the sentence (and/or usage of performative verbs) suggest a different purpose than it actually has.
- (9) a. *Could you close the door?*
Please close the door.
b. *There are wolves on the prowl tonight.*
I'm warning you to watch out for wolves.
c. *I think it would be good if you sold that heap you call a car.*
I advise you to sell your car.

| | declarative (.) | interrogative (?) | imperative (!) |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| assertion | | | |
| info request | | | |
| order+req | | | |
| etc | | | |

3 Rules of Conversation

According to H. Paul Grice (English philosopher, 1913-88) there are several principles which people automatically follow in a normal communication.

Cooperative Principle: People in a conversation are cooperating.

Conversational Maxims – rules specifying what it means to cooperate.

Flouting a Maxim – speaker intentionally breaks some of the maxims, but not to be noncooperative. Way how to say something indirectly (e.g. sarcasm, irony, fun).

Implicature – inferences we draw about what people mean based on what we know about how conversation works.

3.1 Maxims of Quality

1. Do not lie.

2. Do not things which you can't back up.

(Cooperative) flouting the maxims:

- (10) a. *That's great!* (sarcastically)
b. A: *Chicago's in Kansas isn't it?*
B: *Yes, and I suppose L.A.'s in Idaho as well.*

3.2 Maxim of Relevance

1. Be relevant.

This maxim prevents random, incoherent conversations lacking any continuity.

It helps you to understand the following:

- (11) a. A: *Is Sandy dating anyone these days?*
B: *Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.*
b. A: *Can you pick the kids up at school this afternoon?*
B: *I have piano lessons at 3 p.m.*

(Cooperative) flouting the maxim:

- (12) a. A: *Isn't Kim the biggest jerk you ever met?*
B: *Uh, it sure is nice for this time of year, eh?*
(Kim is behind A)
b. A: *Will he go there?* B: *Is Pope Catholic?*

3.3 Maxims of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
i.e., "Don't say too little"
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
i.e., "Don't say too much"

We usually assume that people are telling us everything we need to know. If they don't say something, then we assume they simply don't know that information.

(Noncooperative) breaking the maxims:

- (13) a. A: *John and Mary have 2 children.*
B: *Are they planning on having a third?*
A: *They already have a third child.*
- b. A: *How did Harry fare in court the other day?*
B: *Oh, he got a fine.* (True, but Harry also got a death sentence)

3.4 Maxims of Manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
e.g. do not use word the speakers won't understand
2. Avoid ambiguity.
i.e. Do not say things which you know could be taken multiple ways.
3. Be brief.
i.e. If you *can* say something in a simple way, do not say it in a long way.
4. Be orderly.

(Noncooperative) breaking the maxims:

- (14) a. *Miss Singer produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of Silent Night.*
Instead of: *Miss Singer sang Silent Night.*
- b. *John rode into the sunset and jumped on his horse.*

(Cooperative) flouting the Maxim:

- (15) *A truck loaded with thousands of copies of Roget's Thesaurus crashed as it left New York publishing house last Thursday, according to the Associated Press. Witnesses were stunned, startled, aghast, taken aback, stupefied, confused, punchy, shocked, rattled, paralyzed, dazed, bewildered, mixed up, surprised, awed, dumb-founded, nonplused, flabbergasted, astounded, amazed, confounded, astonished, boggled, overwhelmed, horrified, numbed, and perplexed.*

3.5 Reasons for Maxims

- We can be more brief in communicating, since we don't need to say everything we would need to if we were being perfectly logical. Hearers can use the maxims to infer a lot of information. (We don't say *John has 4 and only 4 children*)
- By flouting them, we can say things indirectly to avoid some of the discomfort which comes from saying unpleasant things directly. Or we can insult/deride people indirectly without as much danger of confrontation.