

Summary of topics

Chris Potts, Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse, Fall 2007

Sep 5

1 Pragmatics



Pragmatics is the study of language use. The philosopher and linguist Paul Grice identified some very general principles of rational interaction (the maxims). These provide the basis for explaining how a given utterance can suggest or imply (the technical term is ‘con conversationally implicate’) certain meanings over and above what seems to be encoded in the sentence uttered.

From a 1993 Supreme Court decision (cited in Solan and Tiersma’s (2004) book *Speaking of Crime: The Language of Criminal Justice*):

[L]anguage, of course, cannot be interpreted apart from context. The meaning of a word that appears ambiguous if viewed in isolation may become clear when the word is analyzed in light of the terms that surround it.

2 Information structure and preposing

The distinction between discourse-old and discourse-new information is the heart of this unit. The distinction runs through all the semester’s topics. Here, we will concentrate on preposing constructions like *Bagels, I like*, in which the grammatical direct object *bagels* occupies, not its canonical position after the verb, but rather a sentence-initial position. We will seek a better understanding of the effect that using this noncanonical structure has on discourse. We will identify the specific sense in which preposed phrases need to be discourse-old in English.

Customer: Can I get a bagel?

Waitress: We’re out of bagels. But a muffin, I can get for you.

Customer: Can I get a bagel?

Waitress: #We’re out of bagels. But a big tip, I am still expecting anyway.

3 Presupposition and anaphora

3.1 Choosing referring expressions

Natural languages provide a variety of strategies for referring to objects in the world: proper names, descriptions like *the pink panther*, and pronouns like *she*. The conditions on where and how one can use these items felicitously are complex. Being aware of these conditions can substantially improve one's writing.

3.2 Presupposition

Broadly speaking, presuppositions are aspects of an utterance's content that must be true in order for the whole message even to make sense. If an utterance contains a false presupposition, speakers will be confused, and they might unconsciously adopt the false presupposition as true in order to make sense of what is said.

The power of false presuppositions

Are you still looking for a job?

[From an email message that Chris hesitated before deleting]

4 Ellipsis and discourse coherence relations

We'll concentrate on verb-phrase ellipsis, of the sort marked by the underscore in *Ed jumped, and Bill did _ too*. The magic of this silence: it *helps* people process sentences more efficiently. On the face of it, this is surprising, since clauses like *Bill did* appear to be massively ambiguous. But the ambiguity is in fact tightly controlled once the sentence is placed in context. We will address the question of what general principles help language users find the appropriate interpretations.



“Does she... or doesn't she?”

5 Conceptualizing a discourse

5.1 Framing



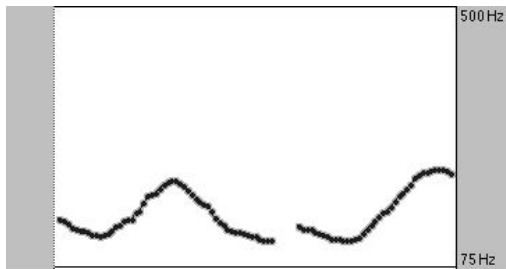
The phrases *tax relief* and *death tax* describe important issues involving taxation. They also carry with them subtle but significant biases. The place names *Kosovo*, *Kosova*, *Kosovo i Metohia* pick out the same geographic region, but they also encode certain perspectives. In the terms of linguist and philosopher George Lakoff, these words are powerful *framing devices*.

don't think of an elephant!
KNOW YOUR VALUES AND FRAME THE DEBATE
★ **GEORGE LAKOFF**

5.2 Intonational meaning

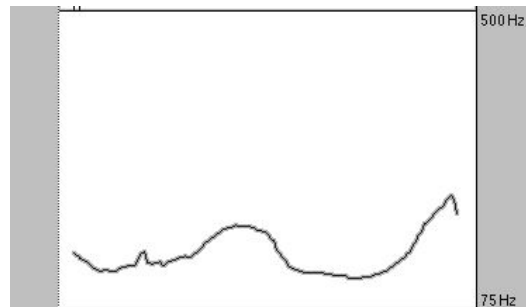
It's not (just) what you say, but how you say it. This could be a slogan for the course, and its literal truth is apparent when one looks at the effects that intonation can have on the content of an utterance. This topic places us at the intersection of semantics, pragmatics, and intonation, where we find many of the course's themes at work.

Mono means one?



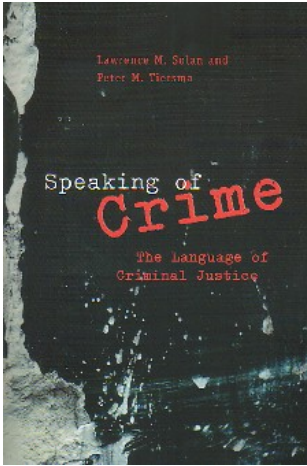
mono means one

Does mono mean one?



does mono mean one

6 Applied pragmatics



Matters of general personal and societal importance often turn on apparently small linguistic distinctions of just the sort discussed in this course. We'll look at examples of language and linguists in the courtroom, in the police interrogation room, at political rallies, and in the popular media. It will be a chance to put our expertise to use.

Case study #1

From Solan and Tiersma's (2004) book *Speaking of Crime: The Language of Criminal Justice* (p. 231):

John and Mary have recently started going together. Valentino is Mary's ex-boyfriend. One evening, John asks Mary, "Have you seen Valentino this week?" Mary answers, "Valentino's been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks." Valentino has in fact been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks, but it is also the case that Mary had a date with Valentino the night before. Did Mary lie?

"This example contains a literally true statement, with an intent to deceive" (p. 231)

Case study #2

A policeman seeks the right to search someone's car.

- i. "I hereby request permission to search your trunk."
- ii. "Can I look in your trunk?"
- iii. "Does your trunk open?"