

Chris's (partial) paper 1

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

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1 Introduction

I've suppressed this section for now, because including it now might make it hard for you to write your own. Be sure to read the assignment, so that you know what is required here.

2 Examples

- (1) **Source:** The television show *The Office* (U.S. version), episode 3.12: 'Traveling salesmen'.

Context: Dwight has a pathological love for the company. He openly scorns some of his colleagues. But he gets along with a few, and he has a secret romance with one of them. In this episode, he was forced to resign (only to return shortly after). The following is his resignation letter, which he abruptly read aloud to the entire office:

Utterance:

Although I love this company more than almost anything in the world, I have decided to step down from my post and spend more time with my family. I do not fear the unknown. I will meet my new challenges head on, and I will succeed. And I will laugh in the faces of those who doubt me. It's been a pleasure working with some of you, and I will not forget those of you soon. But remember, while today it is me, we all shall fall. In other words, I'm quitting.

There is a lot happening in this example pragmatically. I will concentrate primarily on the sentence *It's been a pleasure working with some of you, and I will not forget those of you soon*. The underlining indicates intonational prominence: Dwight stresses that word, clearly trying ensure that we notice it. The conversational implicature is that there are some people in the office with whom Dwight *disliked* working. I now show how this extra meaning arises.

The sentence is a bit awkward, and this is important to understanding what it is intended to mean. It's useful to consider an alternative utterance that would have sounded more natural:

(1') "It's been a pleasure working with you, and I will not forget you soon."

When Dwight starts saying *It's been a pleasure...*, we expect him to say (1'). In this kind of context, social norms indicate that we should acknowledge our colleagues, and the easiest way to do that is with a generically friendly statement. But Dwight consciously avoids the expected. What he actually says is both longer and less natural sounding than (1'). So Dwight seems to violate the maxim of **manner**, which demands clear, concise utterances.

Dwight's actual statement is, in addition, less informative than (1'): if we pay attention only to semantics, then *It's been a pleasure working with some of you* leaves it open whether Dwight enjoyed working with the entire group (which is why it doesn't sound contradictory to say, *It's been a pleasure working with some of you, in fact, with all of you*). Because of these informativity considerations, Dwight appears to violate of the maxim of **quantity**, a demand to be as informative as is required.

Why has Dwight incurred these violations of both manner and quantity? Cooperative speakers typically violate maxims for a reason. In this case, it seems very clear that Dwight violated manner and quantity in order to respect **quality**, the pressure to be truthful. We conclude that (1') would be *false* if Dwight uttered it, which delivers the implicature that he disliked working with some (but, it seems, not all) of his colleagues. Another way to put this: in order to maintain the assumption that Dwight is a cooperative speaker, we have to assume that he can't utter (1'), that he was forced to its more cumbersome, less informative alternative.

My second example works similarly, though it is initially hard to see the connection:

(2) **Source:** The article 'I've made mistakes...' , CNN.com, August 23, 1999.

Context: In the summer of 1999, the question of whether then-candidate George W. Bush had used alcohol or drugs in the past became a major issue. At the time, this was dangerous ground for politicians. The negative effects of Clinton's dodgy statements about using marijuana were still fresh in their minds, and they had not moved to the current strategy of admitting drug use early to diffuse the issue. Thus, when asked about his past drug and alcohol use, Bush was always circumspect. The following was his response to a reporter's question about whether or not he could pass the current FBI background check for people working in the White House

Utterance:

Not only could I pass the background check and the standards applied to today's White House, but I could have passed the background check when my dad was President, a 15-year period.

This answer is quite complicated. On the one hand, he provides more information than the reporter asked him for, since he asserts that he could pass the background check for more times than the reporter asked him about. But it is precisely this over-answering that gets him into trouble. One immediately wonders why he didn't choose the alternative (2').

(2') "I could always have passed the background check."

Version (2') is shorter and more informative, and it is, therefore, a less marked answer. As with Dwight's utterance, we immediately conclude that **quality** prevented him from uttering it. And this, in turn, generates the conversational implicature that Bush could not pass the FBI background check 16 or more years ago. In the current context, this amounts to a tacit admission of past drug use.¹

¹The article linked above, 'I've made mistakes...' , is fascinating to read, because Bush and his advisors kept getting the strategy wrong, by providing modifiers expressing different time periods. Clearly, they needed a linguist on staff.

3 General principles at work

The above examples are united in the following sense: in both cases, the speaker utters a *longer* sentence than we might have expected. The longer sentence is also *less informative* than the obvious shorter choice. In both cases, it seemed clear that the pressure to be truthful was forcing the speaker in question to compromise on these other pragmatic guidelines. This dynamic interplay is very common in discourse: any time a speaker says less than she could have but uses more words (or more marked forms) to do it, we get conversational implicatures that the obvious alternative can't be uttered, either because it is false or because the speaker can't support it directly.

4 Conclusion

These examples highlight the importance of pragmatic inference in general. If we are not attuned to conversational implicatures when listening to Dwight, then we miss his intended meaning. If we are not attuned to conversational implicatures when listening to Bush, then we are liable to mistakenly think that his detailed answer was fully cooperative, when in fact it subtly avoided providing the crucial information directly.

The two examples appeared quite different at first, but probing them with the maxims in mind revealed important commonalities. This can provide insights into the pragmatics of natural language, and it can yield practical payoffs for anyone investigating what truths speakers mean to convey indirectly (or quietly hide away) with their utterances.