

Some pragmatic generalizations

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

Sep 24

Note It's my hope that these generalizations will help you analyze your examples and, in turn, help you write the paper.

- (1) All utterances obey at least some of the maxims. So it is not particularly interesting to observe, of some utterance, that it obeys one or a few of the maxims. Apparent *violations* tend to be more interesting.
- (2) Without rich contextual information, there is no pragmatic inference. (Thus, if you don't tell us the relevant facts about the context, your analysis will flounder.)
- (3) Pragmatic calculations generally involving comparing an actual utterance with another that the speaker could have used but didn't. (Thus, comparing utterances is the best strategy for analyzing examples.)
- (4) If a speaker mentions two things *A* and *B* together in the same discourse, then people will work hard to find a way of making *A* and *B* relevant to each other, even if the speaker never tells them what the connection is.
- (5) Normal events are reported with normal language. Unusual events are reported with unusual language.
- (6) Long answers often appear cooperative even when they supply no new (or accurate) information. This is why they are beloved by politicians and pundits.
- (7) There is a tension in the maxim of manner: if we keep our utterances brief, they tend to get ambiguous. To avoid ambiguity, we typically need to use lots of words.
- (8) Some ambiguous utterances are better than their unambiguous counterparts. People who willfully misunderstand such utterances are uncooperative. (Don't always blame the speaker.)