

Natural Language Pragmatics on One Sheet of Paper

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Semantics = what makes a sentence *true* (truth conditions).

Pragmatics = why you say what you do, when you do.

Pragmatics is the newest major area of linguistics (first taught as a field c. 1974).

The term goes back much earlier. Looking at it another way:

Syntax = relations of elements of language to each other;

Semantics = relation of language to what you are talking about;

Pragmatics = relation of language to the context in which you are talking.

Implication = what is **implied** =

what follows from the truth-conditions of a sentence

(e.g., “it’s raining” → “there is water falling from the sky”)

Implications belong to semantics.

They are not cancellable.

Implicature = what is **implicated** =

what follows from when and how you said it

(e.g., “it’s raining” → “you won’t be able to play golf as you said you wanted to”)

Implicatures belong to pragmatics.

They are cancellable (e.g., “it’s raining, but maybe it will stop in time...”)

Grice’s Maxims (H. P. Grice, 1975):

When we talk, we follow a set of unwritten rules such as:

Be relevant.

Give enough information to support what you are saying.

Do not give too much information.

If describing a quantity along a scale, don’t get too far from the true value.

If a speaker violates these maxims, the result is *true but misleading*

(e.g., saying “it’s above freezing” when it is in fact 90 F).

Following the rules is a matter of *cancellable implicature*:

saying “it’s above freezing” at 90 F could be perfectly appropriate if the context is that you are talking about refilling your windshield washer.

More interestingly,

*if someone appears to be violating these maxims,
we assume there’s a reason.*

E.g., if I write you a letter of recommendation and all I say is, “He passed all his first-year courses,” the recipient will assume I didn’t have anything better to say about you, and thus that you’re not too hot...

Locution, illocution, perlocution (J. L. Austin, 1962, 1975)

Words do not just put information into another person.

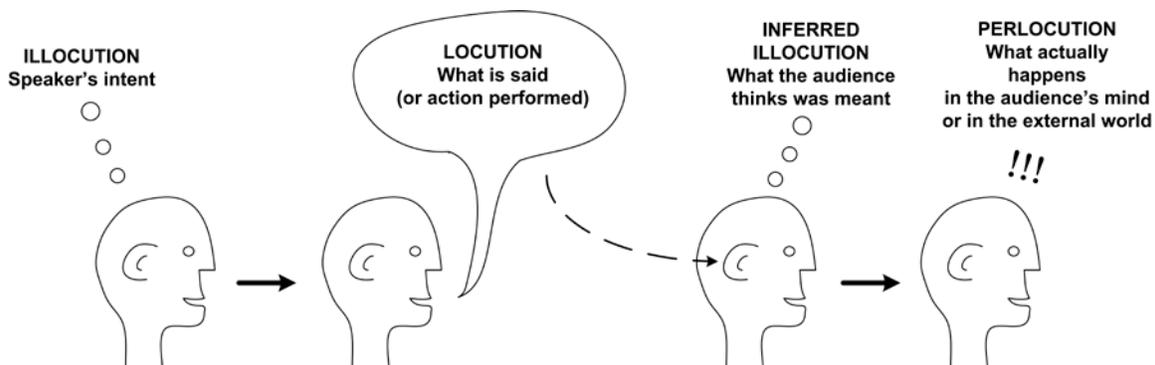
The effect of speaking may not be what you intend.

Locution = what you say

Illocution = what you intend

Perlocution = what you actually accomplish

This is very applicable to international relations, diplomacy, politics, etc.

**Speech act theory** (Searle):

Looking more closely at illocution, we find that...

- There are many kinds of speech acts (statements, questions, promises, etc.).
- Sometimes one kind of speech act implicates another (e.g., polite requests expressed as questions: "Can you open the door?")
- Speech act theory is useful for classifying business messages and transactions (Covington, *Intl. J. of Electronic Commerce* 1997).

The F(P) hypothesis:

We never simply communicate a proposition *P*. (No "Vulcan mind melds.")

Everything we say is wrapped in a speech act *F*(...) (an **illocutionary force**).

The hearer must always **reason** in order to figure out how to take what was said.

Other areas of pragmatics

Pragmatics also includes:

- Discourse structure
- Politeness (seminal work by Brown & Levinson, applicable to the design of user-friendly software)
- Psycholinguistics (pragmatics is a major factor in some language disorders, including schizophrenia)
- Sentiment analysis (new area of computational linguistics trying to determine writer's attitude toward what he is describing)