

# 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.

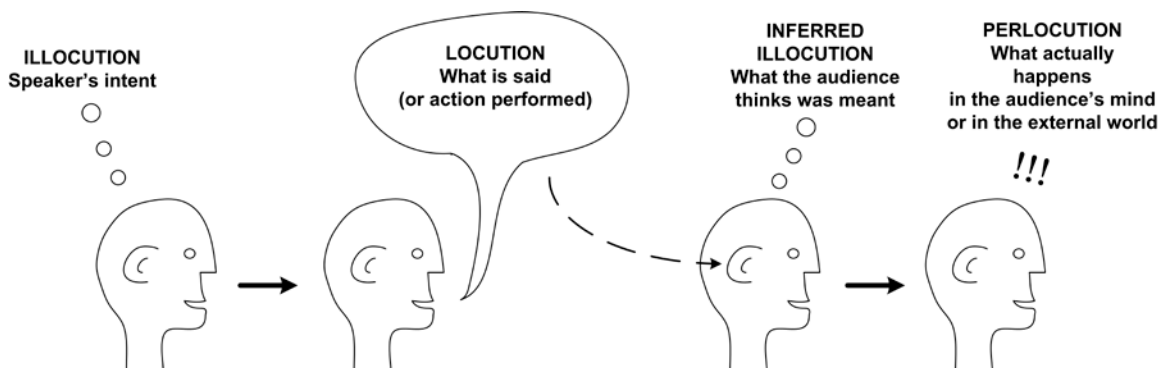
The effect of speaking may not be what you intend.

**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  $F(\dots)$  (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)