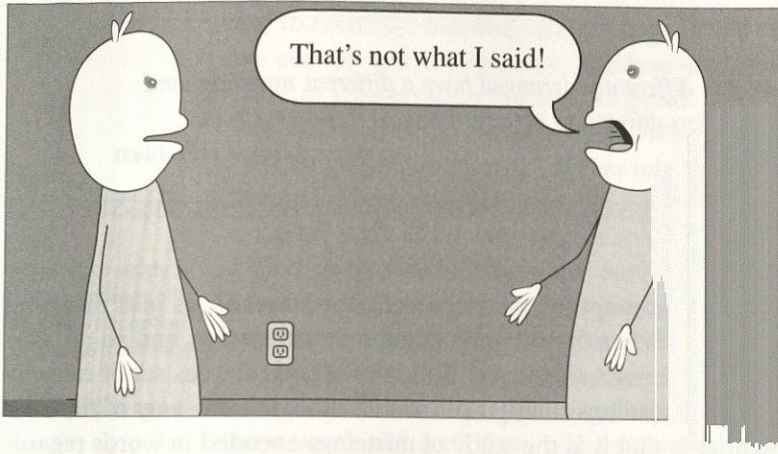




Semantics and Pragmatics: Making Meaning with Sentences

Key Concepts

- Like words, sentences also have meaning, derived both from their structure and from the context in which they are uttered.
- Though we may think otherwise, our conversations actually follow rules. We are experts at manipulating these rules, maintaining them, violating them, and sometimes just ignoring them to express meaning.
- Cultural politeness conventions also shape how we talk to each other.
- Our language may (or may not) influence how we think.

Did You Know . . . ?

The Cooperative Principle and Language Acquisition
Does Culture Count?
Lost in Translation

Language Alive! Culture Clash and Pragmatic Failure

Register as a Literary Device

Linguistics in the News Watson the Computer Plays "Jeopardy!"

Accent on Forensic Linguistics

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Summary

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Review, Practic

Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect.

—BLAISE PASCAL (1623–1662)

sentence meaning
meaning of a sentence regardless of context or knowledge of the world (its linguistic meaning)

hwæt!

Blaise Pascal was a French philosopher, mathematician, and physicist in the seventeenth century. He was a strong supporter of the scientific method and made important contributions in diverse areas, including geometry, mechanics, and probability theory.

utterance meaning
meaning of utterances in context; their unspoken or indirect meaning

In the previous chapter, we discussed word meanings and meaning relationships such as hyponymy, metaphor, antonymy, and so on. Our discussion concerned semantics, the study of the complex set of rules by which we assign meanings to linguistic sounds or signs. One way of thinking about semantics is that it is the study of meanings encoded in words regardless of their context. In this chapter, we will discuss the meaning encoded in sentences, or **sentence meaning**. Like the word meanings we discussed in Chapter 9, sentence meaning is the meaning of a sentence on its own regardless of its context. Consider, for example, the sentence *Have you quit smoking?* This sentence encodes more than just a question; it has the additional meaning that you smoked at some point in the past. We extract this meaning from the sentence regardless of the context in which the sentence is uttered—the

meaning is encoded in the sentence itself. And what about this sentence: *Jones was killed, but he didn't die*. The oddity of this sentence, a contradiction, comes from the fact that it is both false and true at the same time. We understand this as a contradiction regardless of context, just from the meanings of the words.

The meanings encoded in words and sentences are not the only way we make meaning out of language, however. Sentences, like words, can also have nonliteral meanings. The sentence *I want to be a linguistics major* conveys exactly what it seems to—that you have a desire to be a linguistics major (sentence meaning). But not everything we say is so straightforward. What about when you say “How are you doing?” when you greet someone on the street? Are you really asking for information about someone’s well-being, or are you simply saying *hello* in a nonliteral way? (We know it’s usually the latter because if someone actually gives us a detailed description of how they are doing in response to this question, it’s usually far more than what we wanted to know.) We will discuss the unspoken or indirect meaning of sentences here, what we’ll call **utterance meaning**, and how these unspoken meanings differ from “direct,” or literal, meanings.

We will look at how we make conversational choices, such as to use *please* or *thank you*; to call someone by his or her first name, a nickname, or a formal title; to say *yes* in some contexts but *yeah* in others. We’ll also look at the rules of conversation that are shared by most speakers, rules that we

use to construct meaningful exchanges. We'll discuss how much information we convey and in what way, and how we know not only how to follow the rules of conversation but how to break them in order to express meaning. For example, when someone asks "What are you reading?" you might say, "My linguistics textbook," or you might say "A book!" Each response conveys a different meaning and has a different purpose.

pragmatics study of the meanings of sentences in context (utterance meaning)

The study of the meaning of language in context (utterance meaning) is called **pragmatics**. Pragmatics overlaps semantics (and utterance meaning overlaps sentence meaning) to provide us with a bigger picture of how we construct meaning out of language. We close the chapter with a discussion of the influence of language on how we think. Do the meanings we construct out of language reflect our view of the world? Does language reflect how we think? And if so, what does this mean about different languages and different cultures? How much does language influence our view of the world and vice versa?

Sentence Semantics: The Linguistic Meaning of Sentences

The first thing we have to do before pursuing sentence meaning in any detail is to briefly consider once again what we mean by *sentence*. And how does a sentence differ from an *utterance*? Do we need to make a distinction between the two?

Recall from Chapter 7 that a sentence is not the same thing as a clause; a sentence can contain many clauses, as in the following example:

I think that Louise told me that someone said that a train is coming.

A sentence can also be made up of a single clause:

A train is coming!

This sentence is not an utterance; you are reading it rather than saying it out loud or hearing someone say it to you. Its meaning, then, is based not on context but on the meaning encoded in the sentence itself. But if someone uttered or, even more specifically, *yelled* into your ear, "A train is coming!" your reaction might be very different from what it is here as you read the sentence on the page. You may take the meaning of this sentence to be a warning. So, in this case, the meaning of what we might call an utterance is determined in part by the context, by the speaker, and by the hearer.

So the distinction between sentence and utterance is rather fuzzy, and we will not attempt to pursue a precise definition here. But we will distinguish between *sentence meaning* and *utterance meaning*. We will define *sentence meaning* as the literal meaning of a sentence, regardless of context.

Utterance meaning is the meaning of a sentence in context, where the speaker's intention and hearer's interpretation contribute to meaning. In the next section, we look at sentence meaning in more detail, and we take up utterance meaning later in the chapter.

Propositions and Truth Conditions

Think again about the sentence *A train is coming!* Regardless of context, this sentence has a meaning; it expresses a **proposition**, namely, that a train is coming. Whether a train is or is not really barreling down the track at this moment is irrelevant to how we assess sentence meaning; rather, propositions are meanings derived from sentences regardless of the facts of the world or the context in which the sentence is uttered. The principles of logic studied by philosophers and formal semanticists give us the framework for the study of the propositions expressed by a sentence. Key in this study is whether a proposition is logically true or false, its **truth condition**. Consider the following:

A train is coming.

A train is not coming.

In logical terms, we can say that the proposition expressed in the first sentence (namely, that a train is coming) is true, but that same proposition is false in the second: It is not the case that a train is coming. This general property of sentence meaning holds across languages: Sentences can express propositions—assertions that are either true or false.

Interestingly, truth conditions hold regardless of whether the proposition expressed is really possible. For example, we understand that the proposition expressed in *A unicorn is in my garden* is true (in the logical sense), and we know that this proposition is false in the sentence *A unicorn is not in my garden*. This understanding of propositions holds regardless of whether we believe in unicorns and regardless of whether we have gardens.

When Sentences Don't Express Propositions

Not all sentences contain propositions. More specifically, not all sentences have truth conditions. Take, for example, the sentence *Is there a unicorn in my garden?* The proposition *There is a unicorn in my garden* does not follow from this sentence. Similarly, in the negative sentence *Isn't there a unicorn in my garden?* it does not follow that *There is not a unicorn in my garden*. This is because in interrogative sentences, propositions are questioned rather than asserted. A similar situation arises with commands, or imperative sentences. The sentence *Get out of here!* does not assert a proposition; the proposition *You will get out of here* does not follow.

proposition

assertion expressed
by a sentence
regardless of context
or real-world facts

truth condition

whether a
proposition is
logically true or false
regardless of context
or real-world facts

Analytic and Synthetic Sentences

Take a look at the following sentences. Are they true or false? Why?

George's uncle is a man.

She is her daughter's mother.

Sue met a bachelor who is unmarried.

Such sentences are *necessarily* true because their truth derives from linguistic meaning, not from any actual facts. For example, you don't have to know George's uncle to know that the proposition *George's uncle is a man* is true, and you don't have to know anything about Sue or the person she met to know that *Sue met a bachelor who is unmarried* is also true (and redundantly so). Such necessarily true sentences are called **analytic sentences**.

Now, think about sentences whose truth conditions depend on our knowledge of the world. The sentence *That dog is brown* expresses the proposition that there is a dog that is brown, but it is quite different from *That dog is a canine*. This second proposition is true because of its meaning relationships; as we saw in Chapter 9, the meaning of *dog* includes the meaning of *canine*. But the meaning of *dog* does not include the meaning *brown*, so the truth of *That dog is brown* depends not on the meaning relationships within the sentence itself but on meanings we gather from our knowledge of the world. Sentences that are true because they accord with the facts of the world are called **synthetic sentences**.

analytic sentence

sentence that *must* be true regardless of real-world facts

RPE 10.2

synthetic sentence

sentence that is true because it accords with real-world facts

When Meanings Overlap: Entailment and Paraphrase

Let's take a closer look at how sentences can include the meanings of other sentences. You may remember from Chapter 9 the meaning relationship called entailment. For example, the word *thoroughbred* entails the meaning of *horse*. This entailment relationship is called *hyponymy*. When we construct sentences with hyponyms, the sentence will also express those entailments. So, the meaning of the sentence *Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred* entails the meaning of the sentence *Seabiscuit is a horse*.

Thoroughbreds are horses.

Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred.

Seabiscuit is a horse.

Entailment can be logically expressed in the following way:

Entailment: A proposition X entails a proposition Y if the truth of Y follows necessarily from the truth of X.

hwaet!

Seabiscuit was a champion racehorse in the 1940s—an unlikely champion who became a symbol of hope for many Americans during the Great Depression. He's been the subject of a 1949 film, a 2001 book, and a 2003 film, *Seabiscuit*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture.

paraphrase
(sentence
synonymy)
sentence with the
same entailments as
another sentence

Recall that words are synonymous when they share the same basic meanings. Sentences can also be synonymous when they express the same entailments: when the truth of one sentence entails the truth of the other. Some examples of synonymous sentences, or **paraphrases**, are given below.

Seabiscuit beat War Admiral.
War Admiral lost the race against Seabiscuit.
Mary sold her house to Sue.
Sue bought Mary's house.

In these examples, paraphrases are created by using different words and phrases that have the same entailments. Paraphrases can also be created by syntactic movement (such as by passive construction), as illustrated below. Both of these sentences entail that Seabiscuit beat War Admiral.

Seabiscuit beat War Admiral.
War Admiral was beaten by Seabiscuit.

Subtle differences in word meaning can affect entailments. For example, the words *unmarried man* and *bachelor* entail each other (and are synonymous), and their meanings can be expressed by semantic features.

Mary met an unmarried man. [+ male, + adult, -married]
Mary met a bachelor. [+ male, + adult, -married]

The following two sentences do not have the same entailments, which illustrates the difference between *kill* and *assassinate*, a distinction that is difficult to express in terms of semantic features.

Booth killed Lincoln.
Booth assassinated Lincoln.

Both sentences entail that Lincoln died and that Booth was the agent of his death. The word *assassinate*, however, also entails that Booth's killing of Lincoln was politically motivated. It is difficult to see how semantic features could handle this. (Is there a feature [+ politically motivated]?) These two terms overlap in meaning but aren't synonymous.

And finally, ambiguous sentences (discussed in Chapters 8 and 9) are those in which there is more than one set of entailments. Consider, for example:

She wrote a book on Fifth Avenue.
He should lose those ugly polyester shirts.

The first sentence is syntactically ambiguous: one interpretation entails that she wrote a book while she was located on Fifth Avenue (she wrote a book, say, on dinosaurs); the other entails that she wrote a book *about* Fifth Avenue and says nothing about where she was when she did so. The second sentence is lexically ambiguous because of the verb *lose*, which can mean either 'misplace' or 'discard'. Each sentence has more than one meaning and, therefore, more than one set of entailments.

Sentences That Can't Be True: Contradictions

contradiction

sentence that can't be true

Sentences that logically can't be true are called **contradictions**. For example, *The man is canine* can't be true (in contrast to the analytic sentence *The man is human*, which is necessarily true). Consider the following sentences, each of which contains more than one clause. Are any of them contradictions?

- (1) Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred, and Seabiscuit is not a thoroughbred.
- (2) Either Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred or Seabiscuit is not a thoroughbred.
- (3) If Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred, Seabiscuit is a thoroughbred.
- (4) If every racehorse is here, no racehorse is not here.
- (5) If some racehorse is here, then no racehorse is here.

You probably figured out that (1) and (5) can't be true and are contradictions. You can probably also see that the truth conditions of these connected sentences depend in part on the logical relationships expressed by *and*, *either*, *or*, *if*, *every*, *some*, and *no*—members of the functional categories *conjunction* and *quantifier* (discussed in Chapters 5 and 7). In logic, *and*, *either*, *or*, and *if* are **logical connectives**, and they interact with quantifiers (such as *every*, *some*, and *no*) and negation (*not*) to affect sentence meaning in crucial ways. A full discussion of the interaction of these words would take us far into the realm of logic, so we won't pursue it here, but note that we have no trouble interpreting the meanings of these connected sentences, another piece of evidence for our (very complex) unconscious knowledge of language.

logical connectives

words that express logical relationships, such as *either*, *or*, and *if*

RPE 10.4

Presupposition

We have seen so far that words and sentences can express entailment relations in a variety of ways. Entailments depend on the complex interplay of propositions, truth conditions, and logical connectives and do not, crucially, seem to depend on our knowledge of the world. Another type of entailment is **presupposition**, wherein we infer, or assume, certain propositions based on a particular sentence.

Have you stopped kissing Seabiscuit?

Presupposition: You used to kiss Seabiscuit.

I regret that Seabiscuit lost the race.

Presupposition: Seabiscuit lost the race.

I would love to go to another race.

Presupposition: I have been to at least one race already.

Presupposition on one level seems exactly like entailment: a logical conclusion follows from a particular proposition. There is some controversy, however, about whether presupposition, in contrast to entailment, relies on context rather than being strictly confined to sentence meaning. The argument is that a particular sentence will always express the same entailment(s)

presupposition

assumption that is implied by a word or sentence based on world knowledge

but not always the same presuppositions. Linguist Stephen Levinson (1983: 187) provides the following sentences to illustrate:

She cried before she finished her thesis.

Entailment: She was working on her thesis.

Presupposition: She finished her thesis.

She died before she finished her thesis.

Entailment: She was working on her thesis.

Presupposition: She finished her thesis.

When we change the verb in the sentence from *cry* to *die*, the proposition *she finished her thesis* is no longer presupposed because of what we know about dead people and their ability to complete projects. If we assume that presuppositions do not depend on contextual knowledge, then this difference should not arise. Presupposition, then, is often considered a part of pragmatics, in which context rather than semantics plays a role.

RPE 10.5

When Semantics and Syntax Overlap: The Structure of Meaning

In this section, we'll investigate the overlap of sentence meaning (semantics) and sentence structure (syntax). This overlap is illustrated by the Chomsky's well-known sentence:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

Remember that this sentence is syntactically well formed but semantically deviant. For this sentence to make sense, we have to change the words, coming up with a sentence such as the following:

Colorful red flags wave furiously.

or

Shoeless small children peer curiously.

You get the idea, and it's pretty straightforward. But a slightly different problem arises in sentences such as the following, and something else must be fixed to make them grammatical.

*She slept the baby.

*Jude met that Sam is smart.

*The doctor seemed singing the blues.

These all sound very weird, but changing the words doesn't help: **She slept the bed* is also ungrammatical, as is **Jude met that the bus is on time*. These sentences are ungrammatical

hwæt!

Some normally intransitive verbs can take complements, but they are nearly always lexically related to the verb, and they have a poetic quality: *sleep a deep sleep, dream a dream, die a slow death*.

because they violate syntactic rules, which is different from the violation we see in *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. We can fix them by changing the syntax:

She slept.

Jude met Sam.

The doctor seemed cheerful.

Here, we've eliminated the NP *the baby* from the first sentence and changed the clause *that Sam is smart* to an NP, *Sam*, in the second. In the third sentence, we've replaced the VP *singing the blues* with the AP *cheerful*. In the first example, we've eliminated the complement of the verb altogether, and in the other two we've replaced the complement of the verb with a complement of a different syntactic category: We've replaced a clause (CL) with NP, and VP with AP.

That changing the syntax makes these sentences meaningful tells us that syntax overlaps semantics. These data also suggest that part of our grammatical system includes rules that determine the syntactic configurations in which a particular verb can occur. *Sleep* is intransitive, for example, which means that it takes no complement at all. But *met*, on the other hand, is transitive and must take an NP (specifically, a direct object) as a complement. Semantic rules tell us what kinds of meanings go together: The subjects of the verbs *sleep* and *meet* must be things or entities that can sleep and meet something or someone (eliminating *colorless green ideas* as a candidate for the subject of *sleep*, for example). Syntactic rules require that the subjects of these verbs are of the category NP and also that the complement of *meet* is an NP as well (excluding the clause *that Sam is smart* in this position).

This overlap between syntax and semantics is one of linguistics' gray areas; it is not always easy to determine whether certain properties of language are best described as semantic, syntactic, or both. For example, does the fact that *meet* requires an NP complement rather than a clause complement follow from the fact that *meet* must be followed by a thing, namely, something that can be met? Is it semantics that determines the category of that complement, or is it the other way around? We will outline some of the central ideas that linguists have advanced to explain this complex relationship.

arguments set of phrases that occur with a verb and are assigned certain semantic roles by the verb

thematic roles semantic roles, including *agent*, *patient*, *source*, *goal*, etc., that the verb assigns to its arguments

Thematic Roles and Argument Structure

To explain the evidence that verbs seem to “select” semantically appropriate phrases with which they occur, linguists have proposed that these phrases, or **arguments** of a verb, are assigned certain semantic roles, or **thematic roles**, by the verb. Table 10.1 lists some common thematic roles assigned to different phrases.

Table 10.1 Typical Thematic Roles

Agent: Initiator of the action (capable of volition)*

The puppy chewed up the shoe.

Marty played chess.

Patient: Entity undergoing the effect of some action or change of state

The ice melted.

The sun melted *the ice*.

Marty cooked *the bacon*.

Theme: Entity moved by the action or whose location is described (with no change of state)

The horse is in the stable.

Juanita passed *the ball* to Jake.

Marty gave Leo *a book*.

Experiencer: Entity that is aware of the action or state described by the verb but is not in control of that action or state

Marty felt happy.

The referee observed the game.

The deer heard the hunter in the woods.

Beneficiary: Entity for whose benefit the action was performed

Marty gave *Leo* the book.

We baked a cake for *Lorian*.

Instrument: Means by which an action is performed or by which something comes about

She flipped the pancakes with *a spatula*.

Miss Scarlet killed Colonel Mustard with *a lead pipe*.

Location: Place in which something is situated or takes place

We ate *at Denny's*.

John sprinted *to the goal*.

Goal: Entity toward which something moves, either literally or metaphorically

Marty gave the book *to Leo*.

She gave a speech *to the club*.

Source: Entity from which something moves, either literally or metaphorically

The water bubbled *from the spring*.

They came all the way *from New Orleans*.

*Definitions from Saeed, J. 2003. *Semantics*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell. 149–150.

The verb *sleep*, for example, assigns the thematic role *patient* to one argument, but the verb *meet* two arguments and assigns the role *agent* to one and *theme* to the other.

sleep: patient

meet: agent, theme

As stated here, the relationship between the verb and its arguments is purely semantic; what's lacking, however, is the information about where each argument occurs in the sentence and the category of the argument itself as NP, PP, and so on. Nothing in the above information about *sleep* and *meet* tells us, for example, that *meet* assigns the agent's thematic role to an NP in the subject position and the theme's thematic role to an NP in the object position. This syntactic information must be included somewhere in our grammatical knowledge, in what we will refer to as **argument structure**. Our knowledge of syntax and semantics includes not only the thematic roles that a verb assigns but also principles and rules that determine the syntactic categories and positions of those arguments.

This concludes our discussion of sentence meaning. In the following section, we turn to meaning in context, or pragmatics. Just as semantics and syntax overlap, we'll see that there is some overlap between semantics and pragmatics and that both contribute to how we understand and use language.

argument structure
set or arguments
of a verb and their
syntactic categories

RPE 10.6

Pragmatics: How Context Shapes Meaning

If you were to hear an urgent, adult voice utter "A train is coming!" while you were standing on a railroad track not paying much attention to the proximity of trains, you would, under typical circumstances, quickly move off the track to safety. The meaning of this utterance is bound up with the context in which you hear it—where you are, what you are doing, who says it, what kind of experiences you've had, your cultural expectations, and so on. It's a warning. Now consider a different scenario. You are on the train track again. A child comes up with her mother and, laughing, says, "A train is coming!" You don't flinch; you smile benignly and remain where you are. In this case, the meaning of the utterance is quite different. You know from the situation that there is no danger (the parent, for example, doesn't seem concerned about you getting off the track), and the speaker is a laughing child whose intention is not to warn but to amuse. So, the social context within which a sentence is uttered can affect its meaning (here, what is a warning under certain circumstances becomes a joke under others), as can the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation. How speaker intention and hearer interpretation affect meaning is the subject of pragmatics, the study of *utterance meaning*, or how the meanings of the things we say

LINGUISTICS
IN THE NEWS

Watson the Computer Plays "Jeopardy!"



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"What is Toronto?????" In a bout with human "Jeopardy!" champions Ken Jennings and Brad Rutter, Watson the IBM computer was first to buzz in. The answer was "Its largest airport is named for a WWII hero, its second largest for a WWII battle" in the category "U.S. Cities." The correct response was Chicago. Does this mistake mean that Watson isn't as smart as he's supposed to be? It seemed like a pretty major mistake, but Watson was smart enough to wager only \$947 and win the game.

IBM's Watson is a "question-answering" machine, designed to understand questions put to it in natural language and respond (through a voice synthesizer) with a factual answer. So Watson, unlike a search engine, doesn't simply point a user to a document that contains the answer. Rather, Watson produces an answer itself, as a human would in conversation. Watson's abilities are particularly put to the test on a game show such as "Jeopardy!", where clues to questions require complex decoding of language (such as witty puns and other wordplay based on cultural experience)

rather than on logic. It was logic that led another IBM computer, Deep Blue, to beat chess champion Gary Kasparov at chess in 1997. Watson, it seems, brings us one step closer to being able to program computers to understand language in the way that humans do.

Watson was developed by David Ferrucci, senior manager of IBM's Semantic Analysis and Integration department. IBM gave Ferrucci three to five years and a team of fifteen people to develop a question-answering system that could win at "Jeopardy!" Ferrucci and his colleagues fed millions of documents into Watson's memory (including dictionaries, thesauruses, bibles, and encyclopedias) and programmed it with hundreds of algorithms so that Watson can "think" in hundreds of directions at a time. Algorithms rank the plausibility of answers, providing Watson not with a "right" answer but with many possibilities, ranked in order of plausibility. So Watson is basically programmed to find the answer that is "more right" than the others and to be able to cross-check answers. (For example, when Watson analyzed the clue "In 1594 he took a job as a tax collector in Andalusia," two most likely answers emerged: "Thoreau" and "Cervantes." Cross-checking "Thoreau" revealed his birth date was 1817, ruling out that answer.)

IBM hopes to market computers like Watson to companies to help decision makers sort through huge amounts of data quickly and efficiently and, based on this information, to get answers quickly. Some argue, however, that Watson's "intelligence" is based only on knowable facts gleaned from written English texts. Human knowledge involves mathematical reasoning and judgment, and understanding language involves not simply semantics but also pragmatics: decoding meaning based on context. Nevertheless, Watson's abilities may tell us something about how our brains process language and how we make educated guesses about meanings of words and sentences.

For more information
O'Connor, A. Watson dominates 'Jeopardy' but stumbles over geography. *New York Times*. 15 February 2011. <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/15/watson-dominates-jeopardy-but-stumbles-over-geography/>

Watch Watson play "Jeopardy!" at <http://www.collegium.com/video/6195785/watson-the-computer-that-could-play-jeopardy>

IBM's Deep QA Project: <http://www.research.ibm.com/deepqa/deepqa.shtml>

are shaped by context. In the following sections, we discuss some of the major topics of study within pragmatics: speech acts, conversational rules, and politeness. We conclude this section with a discussion of *definiteness* and *deixis*, which illustrate how pragmatics and semantics overlap.

Saying What You Mean and Meaning What You Say: Speech Acts

Before we delve more deeply into utterance meaning, let's return briefly to syntax. We use certain kinds of syntactic structures, called *sentence types*, when speaking: interrogatives (questions), imperatives (commands), and declaratives (statements).

Is it raining? (interrogative)

Get out! (command)

I'd like a sandwich. (statement)

speech act

utterance intended to convey communicative force

direct speech act

utterance whose meaning is the sum of its parts, the literal meaning

In pragmatic terms (recall the train example), each utterance we make carries communicative force and can be thought of as performing a particular act, what we call a **speech act**. If you were to say "Is it raining?", you would have performed a speech act. When sentence type corresponds with our intention, it is a **direct speech act**. The speech act *Is it raining?* is a direct speech act if uttered with the intention of asking a question about the truth or falsity of the current level of precipitation. Direct speech acts are the sum of the meanings of their parts. You typically ask a question when you don't know something, and you ask someone so you can have an answer; for example, "Can you juggle?" The appropriate answer would be either *yes* or *no*. In a direct speech act, the intention and effect are predictable; a question is a request for information to which a particular reply is appropriate.

Now, what about this sentence:

Have you cleaned your room yet?

indirect speech act

utterance whose meaning depends on context rather than on literal meaning

This sentence is also an interrogative in terms of sentence type, but does it have to be a question? Not necessarily. What if you have asked your daughter repeatedly to clean her room and told her that if she doesn't, she won't be allowed to go the movies as planned? Uttering this interrogative sentence type actually conveys a (mild) threat: If you don't clean your room, then no movies for you! This sentence (which we'll also assume is an utterance) is an **indirect speech act**: Its meaning depends on context rather than on sentence type.

speech act theory

theory dealing with the construction of meaning in conversation by direct and indirect speech acts

This is just a simple illustration of the complexity of speech acts and of how sentence type does not always correspond to speaker intention (nor, for that matter, to hearer interpretation). **Speech act theory** tries to explain more precisely how meaning and action are related to language. Speech act

theory (originally introduced by Austin in 1962) is concerned with the communicative intentions of speakers and how they achieve their communicative goals. John Austin proposes that communication is a series of communicative acts that are used systematically to accomplish particular purposes and that all utterances perform actions by having a specific force assigned to them. Austin offers three basic kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed by an utterance. They can be informally described as follows:

locutionary act: an utterance with a particular sense and reference (closest to meaning in the traditional sense, the sum of its parts)

illocutionary act: the act (defined by social convention) that is performed by making the utterance: a statement, offer, promise, bet, etc.

perlocutionary act: the (not necessarily intentional) effects on the audience, whether intended or unintended, brought about by the utterance

Examples are useful here. Say that a teacher says, "Jo, would you like to read your poem first?" The locutionary speech act is the literal meaning of the question, namely, whether Jo is interested in reading her poem. The illocutionary speech act is, by social convention, a request that Jo read her poem. The perlocutionary act is its effect on Jo, who might agree or refuse to read her poem.

The philosopher John Searle proposed that the basic unit of human communication is the illocutionary act, more specifically, the indirect speech act, which he says is "[when] the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (1975: 61).

What are some ways that the following question, statement, and command sentence types can be interpreted? In what contexts can these sentences be indirect speech acts?

Can you pass the salt?
Open the door!
Do you know where the museum is?
Tell me why you're never on time!
Is there a bathroom near here?
I'd like one ticket, please.
You left the light on.

Many other factors contribute to how we understand speech acts. Who are the participants in the conversation, and what is their relationship

to one another? Under what conditions is a particular utterance made? If you make a promise, for example, it's only a promise if you can follow through on it or think you can and intend to do so. If you know you can't, it isn't a promise. What do such social factors as age, ethnicity, gender, and religious and political beliefs contribute to utterance meaning? We often violate social conventions, causing miscommunication or worse; sometimes we say things that are insulting, insensitive, or even hateful based on our world knowledge (or lack thereof). Think about humor, too; an utterance might be funny in one context and downright insulting in another, again illustrating that meaning is shaped by context in crucial and often powerful ways.

RPE 10.7

RPE 10.8

Cooperative Talk: Conversational Rules

So far, we've talked about the importance of context, speaker intention, and listener interpretation in determining the meanings of utterances. As speakers, we also share certain implicit conversational rules for how to communicate spoken and unspoken messages. These conversational rules are crucial for successful communication, and we are well aware of how to follow them, or in some cases how to ignore them, in order to convey a particular message. We'll also see that these rules of conversation can vary across languages and cultures, and the lack of shared knowledge regarding these rules can lead to communication breakdown.

The philosopher Paul Grice (1975, 1989) proposed the following **maxims of conversation**, which continue to be an accurate description of the shared rules that speakers use in interactions.

Grice's maxims of conversation rules of conversation that describe the shared rules speakers use in interactions; they include *quantity*, *quality*, *relevance*, and *manner*

Maxim of Quantity

- Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
- Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

Maxim of Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relevance

- Say only things that are relevant.

Maxim of Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
- Be orderly. (1989: 27)

Did You Know...?



The Cooperative Principle and Language Acquisition

Part of acquiring a language is acquiring the pragmatics of the language, not just in order to participate in conversations but, as Brian MacWhinney (2003) proposes, to learn the meanings of words. Suppose a child is presented with three items—a glass, a teacup, and a demitasse—and is asked to pick out each item (“Which is the teacup?” “Which is the glass?”). The child will match the known terms to the known items. The child will also correctly infer that the remaining term, *demitasse*, is the name of the leftover item. MacWhinney proposes that this is not simply because of the process of elimination but because the child is actually relying on the cooperative principle, assuming that the questioner is reasonable and using a new name for a new object. Learning new words and their meanings, according to MacWhinney, involves not only semantics but pragmatics and mutual cooperation.

Grice's cooperative principle

assumption that in conversation speakers will make a sincere effort to collaboratively exchange information

speaker meaning

meaning beyond the words alone, which the speaker assumes the hearer can interpret based on communicative context

The conversational maxims go hand in hand with Grice's **cooperative principle**, another principle of conversation, which assumes that the participants in a conversation will make a “conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (Grice 1989: 26). At its core, the cooperative principle means that in conversation, we don't lie, nor do we assume our conversational partners lie—we are sincere, and for the most part, we contribute relevant information. Grice recognized the difference between sentence meaning and speaker intention (similar to direct and indirect speech acts). He proposed that speakers assume that the hearer can interpret additional meaning based on the context or communicative situation and does not rely on the meanings of the words alone. Grice refers to this kind of meaning as **speaker meaning**.

Manipulating Maxims

Grice also discusses the fact that speakers can violate maxims, often because of *maxim clash*, wherein if one maxim is to be maintained, another must be violated. Even when we violate maxims, meaning is typically conveyed by *implicature* in such cases, and the cooperative principle is maintained. Speakers can also ignore the maxims or flout them, in some cases, as when they are attempting to deceive or are being intentionally obtuse. Flouting a maxim can also involve an implication that creates meaning. Under normal circumstances, however, speakers expect other conversation partners to follow the maxims.

Here are examples of utterances in which the maxims are followed, violated, and then flouted.

- (1) Speaker A: Have you been to a baseball game lately?
Speaker B: No, but I'm going to go to a game this weekend.

Here, the maxims are followed: Speaker A has asked for information, and Speaker B has supplied it in the relevant manner and amount. Now, consider this next exchange:

- (2) Speaker A: When is your next class?
Speaker B: Sometime this afternoon.

Here, Speaker B is violating the maxim of quantity, not providing enough information. But if we assume Speaker B is not doing this deliberately and really doesn't know when the class is, Speaker B is not violating the cooperative principle. Speaker B doesn't want to lie or guess, which would violate the maxim of quality, so has to stick with this uninformative but truthful statement. The interplay of the two maxims (quality and quantity) causes a maxim clash.

Now, look at this third exchange:

- (3) Speaker A: So, do you think Maria will make it to the wedding?
Speaker B: Well, she told me she was taking off work that day.

Here, Speaker B's statement is obscure and doesn't provide the information requested by Speaker A. The maxim of manner is flouted—Speaker B deliberately chooses not to observe it. But Speaker B clearly *implies* an answer to Speaker A's question and so is not being deliberately obscure. Speaker B is therefore following the cooperative principle in this case as well.

And finally, consider this (odd) exchange:

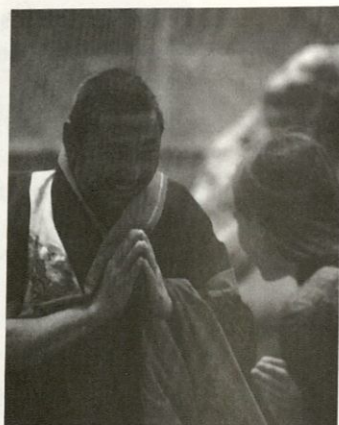
- (4) Speaker A: So, do you think Maria is having a baby?
Speaker B: I have a train to catch.

Here, Speaker B is flouting several maxims by responding to Speaker A's question with a statement that seems completely irrelevant (violating the maxim of relevance), obscure (violating the maxim of quality), and uninformative (violating the maxim of quantity). But, because the cooperative principle is so strong, a possible interpretation of Speaker B's statement here is that Speaker B is refusing to participate in gossip about Maria. By flouting maxims, Speaker B is actually making an interpretable and meaningful conversational move.

The Power of Politeness

The most common reason for an indirect rather than direct speech act is politeness. Politeness takes many linguistic forms and is somewhat

A Buddhist monk
and a European girl
greet each other
with Namaste.



Ernst Haas/Getty Images

difficult to define. Politeness expresses concern for others but also carries the intention of having this concern reciprocated; we're polite because we want to make others feel at ease, and this in turn makes us more comfortable, too. Politeness also crosses social boundaries; adults and small children can be polite to each other, and the president of the United States would be expected to be polite to a citizen he or she meets on the street, even though their social status is dramatically different. So, politeness is not restricted by social distance, and how we perform polite speech acts depends on our gauging and evaluating this social distance (or lack of it). To be considered polite, a speech act must fit the social expectations of politeness in the particular context—expectations that are culturally defined.

positive politeness
politeness
strategy based
on the speaker's
constructing
solidarity with the
addressee

negative politeness
politeness strategy
based on the
speaker's minimizing
imposition on the
addressee

We can break politeness down into **positive politeness** and **negative politeness** (Brown & Levinson 1987). In positive politeness, the speaker and the addressee have the same needs, and the speaker indicates that to the addressee (expressing solidarity with the addressee). In negative politeness, the speaker appreciates the addressee's needs but may not share them (expressing the need to be free from imposing on the addressee). Table 10.2 lists the features of positive and negative politeness.

Is Speaker B's utterance a positive politeness strategy or a negative one?

- (5) Speaker A: I'm so disappointed that I missed the game!
Speaker B: I bet you are! They should have told you they'd rescheduled it!

Speaker B is using positive politeness, expressing solidarity with Speaker A, sympathizing with Speaker A, and assuming common ground by asserting that missing the game is an unfortunate occurrence and agreeing that Speaker A should have been informed of its being rescheduled.

Table 10.2 Features of Positive and Negative Politeness**Positive Politeness**

- Speaker
- claims common ground with the hearer
 - conveys a sense of cooperation with hearer
 - tries to meet or appreciate hearer's needs and desires
 - may offer sympathy, a compliment, optimism, promise, offer, and so on

Negative Politeness

- Speaker
- makes no assumptions about hearer's needs, desires, or abilities to cooperate
 - doesn't assume or attempt to coerce, is direct, and tries not to impose his or her needs on hearer
 - is often pessimistic, deferential, and impersonal

Now, consider the next exchange. Is Speaker A using positive politeness or negative politeness?

- (6) Speaker A: I know you have a lot of students asking you this, but I was hoping you'd let me register for your class; I'd love to take it!
- Speaker B: Well, I'll be happy to if space becomes available, and I'm sorry if it doesn't work out.

This exchange illustrates negative politeness; Speaker A is asking a question of B, trying to minimize the possible imposition on B, and is being very deferential and apologetic. Speaker B responds with a polite, but possibly negative, message: that space may not become available in the class, and Speaker A's needs may not be met.

RPE 10.10

RPE 10.11

Honorifics and Forms of Address

Some languages encode pragmatic distinctions about formality, politeness, and social status more directly in their grammatical system than does English. **Honorifics** are grammatical forms, usually words or affixes, that express the relative social status of the speaker to the addressee. For example, German, Spanish, and French have distinct pronouns for *you* that reflect status and formality.

honorifics
grammatical forms,
usually words or
affixes, that express
the relative social
status of the speaker
to the addressee

German	du	informal you (singular)
	ihr	informal you (plural)
	Sie	formal/polite you (singular or plural)

Language Alive!

Culture Clash and Pragmatic Failure

When the pragmatic differences across cultures collide, communication can break down because speaker intentions are badly misunderstood. The result is *pragmatic failure* (Thomas 1983).

As English becomes the second language of younger generations of Hmong speakers, certain pragmatic practices are lost, causing miscommunication among the younger speakers and their elders. Expectations of what is considered polite, for example, begin to diverge, causing pragmatic failure and social distance. Take the following example, from Lillian Faderman's *I Begin My Life All Over* (1998), a collection of narratives by Hmong immigrants from Laos. Here, Loco Vang, a young gang member, tells the story of how resentment grew between him and his father.

When I go home, I know my mother cares about me a little. But I don't really talk to her. I just say "Hi, hello." Every time I used to help out my dad, he never showed respect to me for it. If he needed me to help him carry, I'd help him. But he never said "Thank you," or "You're welcome." So I got mad. Whenever he tells me what to do now, I don't even bother to do it. (p. 193)

You may recognize Loco Vang's expectations about politeness as similar to your own; in North American culture, speakers explicitly thank each other in a variety of situations, which is not the case among the Hmong. Loco Vang's adoption of American politeness strategies and his father's lack of familiarity with those strategies has led to pragmatic failure and miscommunication. Burt and Yang's (2005) study of pragmatic failure emphasizes the need not only for English language instruction in immigrant communities but also for instruction in cross-cultural pragmatics to minimize the potential for pragmatic failure.

For more information

Burt, S. & H. Yang. 2005. Growing up shifting: Immigrant children, their families, and the schools. In K. Denham & A. Lobeck (eds.), *Language in the schools: Integrating linguistic knowledge into K-12 education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Faderman, L. with G. Xiong. 1998. *I begin my life all over: The Hmong and the American immigrant experience*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Thomas, J. 1983. Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4(2). 91–112.

Spanish	tú	informal you (singular)
	usted	formal/polite you (singular)
	ustedes	formal/polite you (plural)
French	tu	informal you (singular)
	vous	formal/polite you (singular or plural)

Honorifics are used in many languages, including Korean, Javanese, Tibetan, Samoan, and Sudanese. An example from Japanese (Harada 1976: 514) is the series of affixes that can attach to names:

-sama	used to address people of high rank
-san	title of respect, quite common
-chan	a diminutive, informal version of -san, used with children and pets. Used more by women and girls and also to refer to women and girls.
-kun	informal honorific, used primarily for males
-sensei	used to address someone of authority, usually someone who has a particular skill or capability: teachers, doctors, politicians, etc.

hwaet!

You may recognize the word *sensei* and the phrase “bow to your sensei” from *The Karate Kid* and other movies; it’s used to address teachers and other professionals.

Also, many Japanese words take a different form depending on their relative honorific status, and words are grouped into *sonkei-go* (respectful words), *teinei-go* (polite words), and *kenzyoo-go* (humble words). Japanese also employs three levels of politeness: plain, used among friends; polite, used among strangers or to show respect to superiors; and formal, used in formal situations such as speeches. The forms differ

not only in vocabulary but also in the addition of certain affixes. Also, there are two respectful forms for each level of politeness, indicated by distinct verb endings. *Sonkei-go*, the respectful language, shows respect to the subject of the sentence, while *kenzyoo-go*, the humble language, shows respect to the direct or indirect object, primarily by humbling the speaker.

plain:	Jon san ga Sato san wo <i>matsu</i> ‘John is waiting for Sato.’
respect for subject:	Sensei ga o-machi-ni-naru. ‘The teacher is waiting.’
respect for object:	Sensei wo omachi-suru. ‘We are waiting for you, Teacher.’

Javanese is another language that demonstrates respect (based on age, gender, kinship relationships, wealth, etc.) by employing different levels of language. For example, a single expression, *Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?* results in five distinct utterances, depending on the status of the person being addressed, as illustrated by these examples from Geertz (1968: 282–295):

high status:	Menapa pandjenengan bade dahar sekul kalijan kaspé samenika? ‘Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?’
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high with honorific:	Menapa sampéjan bade neḍa sekul kalijan kaspé samenika? 'Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?'
middle status:	Napa sampéjan adjeng neḍa sekul lan kaspé saniki? 'Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?'
low status:	Apa sampéjan arep neḍa sega lan kaspé saiki? 'Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?'
low with honorific:	Apa kowé arep mangan sega lan kaspé saiki? 'Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?'

Though all languages have ways of conveying respect and politeness, some languages have encoded this feature into the grammatical system with honorifics.

Though systems like the Japanese or Javanese may seem complex to English speakers, we all make similar choices about vocabulary and style all the time, based on social status, comfort level, and degree of formality. In English, we vary our language by varying terms of address, such as *Mr.* or *Ms.*; by using tags of camaraderie or endearment, such as *dear*, *sweetie*, or *hon*; by making decisions about word choice, such as *however* versus *but*, *perhaps* versus *maybe*; and even by altering the pitch of our voices. We use euphemisms (discussed in Chapter 9) to avoid taboo words and topics that may cause discomfort; for instance, we may use *rest room* rather than *john* in a particular context, or *sleep together* rather than *have sex*.

RPE 10.12

Register

Even though we think of politeness as “being nice to people”—opening doors for people, offering to help, letting someone go first—politeness has everything to do with power and solidarity. We are polite because we want to create or maintain solidarity, and no matter who we talk to, we are constantly aware of social distance (which we may want to widen or narrow depending on our intentions). Because it is so important in negotiating and maintaining social relationships, we are often insecure about our language. We may use formal language for this purpose in certain contexts but informal language in others—we all are adept at switching **registers**, or speech styles, unconsciously and often to assert our power and status in certain contexts and to minimize it in others. A doctor talking to a patient with a serious illness will use a different register from the one used to discuss the patient with another physician; you most likely talk to your friends during lunch in a register different from the one you use when talking to your teacher or to a small child.

register speech
or writing style
adopted for a
particular audience

Language Alive!

Register as a Literary Device

The images of a novel's characters that we conjure up in our mind's eye are often created by how they talk. Dialogue can reflect differences in register (*sez* rather than *says*, *dunno* rather than *don't know*) and tells us not only about a character but also about social perceptions of language—what is considered lofty and what is considered low. Register in literature also offers us a window into how language, and the social perceptions about it, changes over time. The writing of Geoffrey Chaucer, the great fifteenth-century author of *The Canterbury Tales* and other works, provides not only a rich repository of both the most vulgar and the most sophisticated terms of the time but also of the perceptions about language and how they were linked to class. In addition to *ferre*, *erse*, *pisse*, *shiten*, *queynte*, and *swive* (meaning 'to copulate'), in Chaucer's work we also find such archaic terms as *maat* (Arabic for 'dead' or 'defeated') and *dulcarnoun* 'a puzzle', as well as a range of highly technical terms (such as *solsticium*). The lowbrow but cunning Miller in *The Canterbury Tales* is described almost entirely in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary (Anglo-Saxon and Norse vocabulary in italics):

*The Millere was a stout carl for the nones;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
That proved well, for over al there he cam
At wrastlyng he wolde have alwey the ram
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre.* (lines 545–550)

But the Prioress, who fancies herself sharp and sophisticated, is described in terms borrowed from French, which at this point was a language of diminishing social prestige. Her association with French thus makes her character pretentious and absurd (French vocabulary in italics):

*And likely she was of greet desport,
And ful pleasant and amiable of port,
And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
Of court, and to been estatliche of manere,
And to ben holden digne of reverence.
But, for so speken of hire conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous
She would wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in trappe, if it were deed or bledde.* (lines 137–145)

Examples from Hughes (2000: 125–130).

Register differences show up in various ways. One is word choice; we may use a euphemism (*restroom* versus *john*) depending on audience, and we might use contractions (*gonna*, *wanna*) around our friends but not in a high-intensity job interview. We write in different registers, too; think about the register you use in e-mail compared to the one you use in a research paper.

When Semantics and Pragmatics Overlap

Suppose your teacher walked into class and said “She won the race!” You wouldn’t have any idea who *she* was, but you would know that whoever she was, she was female, and there was only one of her. So the semantics of *she* would tell you something, but the word alone would not provide enough information for you to interpret this sentence. You’d also need information about who or what *she* refers to. This information could be supplied by a previous conversation (about, say, your teacher’s sister, who is running in the Boston Marathon) or by another utterance by your teacher (“My sister won the Boston Marathon!”) or even by someone directing you to a newspaper with a picture of a woman winning a race. In other words, the interpretation of pronouns relies on more than just semantics; pragmatics, or context, also plays a role. In this section, we look at how semantics and pragmatics overlap in constructing meaning.

Definiteness

As we saw in Chapter 7, the determiners *the* and *a* express grammatical information of number; *the* is either singular or plural (*the dog/dogs*), and *a* (*a dog/*dogs*) is singular. The interpretation of these words also relies on context. To illustrate, consider the following:

The woman sent me a letter.

A woman sent me a letter.

What is the difference in interpretation between *the woman* and *a woman* here? What do the different determiners tell us about the speaker and the hearer of these sentences?

The first utterance assumes that both speaker and hearer know to whom the NP *the woman* refers, but this is not the case in the second sentence, where the NP *a woman* does not refer to a particular woman known to both the speaker and the hearer. This distinction is called **definiteness** and is typically expressed in English on words that introduce nouns. Definiteness is the means by which the speaker indicates to the hearer that they share knowledge of the referent of a particular noun phrase.

Proper names are also definite NPs; when we use a name in conversation, we typically assume that the hearer understands who we’re talking about.

Mabel came in.

Certain quantifiers, such as *every*, *each*, and *all*, are definite as well and perhaps obviously so. The following sentences assume that both the speaker and the hearer (or the writer and the reader, in this case) know to whom the underlined noun phrases refer (and in the case of the quantified noun

definiteness means by which the speaker indicates to the hearer that they share knowledge of the referent of a particular noun phrase

phrases, we have no choice, given that the noun phrase refers to all the women who exist!).

Each/every woman came in.

NPs with the quantifiers *some*, *several*, and *many* are indefinite and don't assume the kind of shared knowledge expressed by definite NPs.

Some/many women came in.

How languages express definiteness is quite complex and not something we can always predict based on the determiner. For example, though noun phrases with *the* are typically definite in reference, this is not always the case.

The elephant does not make a good pet.

An elephant does not make a good pet.

Elephants do not make good pets.

The noun phrase *the elephant* here can have a *generic* interpretation and does not refer to a particular referent. It is semantically equivalent to *an elephant* in the second sentence and to *elephants* in the third one, both of which also have generic interpretations and are indefinite in reference.

Sometimes indefinite determiners appear to be semantically definite. Consider, for example, the following sentence from Heim (1982: 8):

A dog came in. It lay down under the table.

In this sentence, the indefinite pronoun *it* appears to refer to the indefinite noun phrase *a dog*. This suggests that the phrase *a dog* is definite and is the antecedent for the pronoun *it*. Philosophers of language provide complex arguments, however, that suggest that *a dog* in this case is indefinite and that the relationship between *a dog* and *it* is very different from the relationship between the definite noun phrase *the dog* and the pronoun *it* in the following example (see, for example, Evans 1977: 467–536).

The dog came in. It lay down on the floor.

Do you see a difference in definiteness?

RPE 10.15

deictic words

words whose meanings can be interpreted only with reference to the speaker's position in space and time (context); the noun *deixis* refers to the pointing or specifying function of such words

Deixis

Definiteness plays an important role in the larger set of words in the language that are **deictic** (from the Classical Greek word *deiknymi* 'pointing'), words whose meanings can only be interpreted with reference to the speaker's position in space and time; that is, they need context in order to be interpreted appropriately. All languages have deictic words, though some have more than others, and they break down into three main types: personal deictics (first- and second-person pronouns such as *my*, *yours*, and

us), temporal deictics (*now, yesterday, tomorrow*, and verb tenses: *ate* versus *eat*), and spatial deictics (*there, behind, left, right, here*). Even verbs can be deictic. Consider the difference between *Don't go in* versus *Don't come in*. *Go* in the first sentence tells us about the speaker's location, namely, outside the location in question, but in the second, the speaker is inside that location. The meanings of these sentences depend on context. Consider another example: *I left it there*. In this sentence, the interpretation of *there* depends on context, as does the interpretation of the pronoun *I*, whose referent is completely dependent on context. Similarly, in *My book will be published next month*, the interpretation of *next month* depends on context—in April, it will be different from what it was in January. The same is true of the expression *my book*; who *my* refers to depends entirely on context.

Demonstratives (*this/that, these/those*) are also definite; both of the following sentences assume shared knowledge of the referent of the italicized phrase.

That woman sent me a letter.

Those students did well on the exam.

Demonstratives differ from other determiners because they are also deictic; part of their meaning is based on the context in which they are uttered. More specifically, demonstratives indicate *proximity* of certain items distinct from others, what is also called *spatial deixis* (the context of the physical surroundings, often accompanied by pointing).

This book was really good. I've never read that one.

Do you like these flowers?

No, but I like those daffodils over there.

The concepts of definiteness and deixis illustrate the overlap between semantics and pragmatics. Definite and deictic terms have grammatical meanings, but their meanings cannot be construed in the absence of context.

RPE 10.16

Language and Thought

As you've probably gathered by now, the notion of *context* is enormously complex and involves power relationships among speakers that are influenced by a vast array of factors, including age, gender, political and religious beliefs, and knowledge of the world. There clearly is a link, then, between language and culture, between how we talk and how we perceive the world. One question about language that has perpetually fascinated philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, and many others (even you?) is how language influences our thinking. Put slightly differently, how does culture influence language and vice versa? Does one determine the other?

Did You Know...?



Does Culture Count?

Because we live in different cultures and speak different languages, do we think in different ways? This question has been stirred up by studies of Amazonian tribes who have words that might mean 'one' or 'two' and words that might mean 'a lot' or 'many' but no words for all the numbers that we have. Some scholars claim this is an issue of culture, not language—these tribes don't need exact numbers because they don't use money.

A new study (Spaepen et al. 2011) shows that without access to language, people will not develop a full number system, even though they live in a numerate culture (e.g., holding jobs and using money). Spaepen's team studied Nicaraguan homesigners, deaf people who have not had access to oral language (Spanish) or signed language (Nicaraguan Sign Language), and found that they do not develop a counting system in the same way as people do who have acquired an oral or signed language. To test for numeration, the researcher would knock one, two, or three times on the signer's fist and look for the same number of knocks in return. Though signers would consistently knock twice for two and once for one, for more than three knocks, the researcher might get four or five knocks on her fist.

This study suggests that language, not culture, is at the core of our ability to comprehend and manipulate large quantities of countable things. Although the human brain can assess small numbers (1, 2, 3) and approximate values (20,000 is a lot more than 10), it needs a counting system to specify the difference between 10 and 11 or between 20,204 and 20,207. It is language, not culture, that unlocks this ability.

For more information

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Linguistic Relativity and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

Benjamin Whorf's claim that language determines our perceptions of the world

A well-known example of the "strong" form of this hypothesis, that language *determines* how we think, was proposed by Benjamin Whorf in the 1950s. Whorf was a student of the linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir, who also was interested in this question; Whorf's version of this idea is now called the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**. Whorf claimed, based on

his study of several languages, that the language of a culture provides a window into how the members of that culture think. More specifically, he claimed that language determines how a culture looks at the world and that cultures that speak different languages as a result think about the world in different ways.

linguistic relativity
theory that
language and
culture influence or
perhaps even deter-
mine each other

The general idea that language and culture influence each other is called **linguistic relativity**. One common example of linguistic relativity is the idea that if we use gender-neutral language, it will mitigate against sexism in the culture. So, if we use the term *mail carrier* instead of *mailman*, we might be less apt to think of those in this line of work as male. Here's another example of culture reflected in language: We use the terms *male nurse* and *woman doctor*; attaching gendered modifiers to the terms *nurse* and *doctor* because we think of these occupations as female (nurse) and male (doctor), which reflects our (sexist) perceptions of the world. The language of war is another case in point; references to indigenous peoples as *savages* during periods of colonization or to Jews as *vermin* during the

Did You Know...?



Lost in Translation

How exactly do we translate ideas expressed in one language into another? The answer lies in how we learn the meanings of words. Do we learn the meanings of words simply by connecting them with the objects they refer to? How do we learn the word *kitty*, for example? We might learn it through *ostention*—the meaning of the word is defined by example. Someone says, “Look, it’s a kitty!” and we’d figure, from the way this sentence is constructed, that the word *kitty* is the label attached to the object in question. But philosopher W. V. O. Quine (1960) argues that ostention only works along with our understanding of other facts about the language, namely, our understanding of the frame *It’s a ____*, and so ostention itself depends on some kind of prior knowledge of the language.

What about when we do not have language to help us determine the meaning of a word? In Quine’s famous example, hunters are out with a guide. The guide points to a rabbit that is running by and says, “Gavagai!” What does this utterance mean? It is unfamiliar to the hunters, so what would they think? They might assume that *gavagai* means *rabbit*, but it could mean *long ears*, *tail*, *Look out!* or *There will be a storm tonight* (suppose the guide is superstitious). To find out the meaning of *gavagai*, the hunters would have to do some extensive investigation, examining other uses of the word in order to determine its meaning. What kinds of knowledge would this require?

For more information

Fodor, J. 1975. *The language of thought*. New York: Crowell.

Quine, W. 1960. *Word and object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Holocaust dehumanized those groups, (ostensibly) licensing their oppression. And using euphemisms (discussed in Chapter 9) such as the term *collateral damage* rather than *civilian deaths* seems to mask the horror of war; what one person might call a *freedom fighter*, another might call a *mercenary* and yet another, a *terrorist*.

Examining the Evidence

Linguistic relativity is in counterpoint to the idea that language and thought are related but rely, in the end, on different cognitive processes. Consider, for example, the fact that we don't always know how to say what we're thinking. As Steven Pinker (1994) points out, we often remember the gist of what was said but not the exact words; there has to be a gist, and this meaning doesn't rely on the original set of words (pp. 55–82). Perhaps more important, Whorf's claims have been soundly debunked by further research into his evidence for strong connections between language and how we think. His conclusions were based on his own perceptions of languages and cultures he knew very little of and on faulty translations of sentences. For example, Whorf claimed that, based on the evidence that the Hopi have no way of grammatically expressing past or future time, their worldview did not include these concepts. Anthropologist Ekkehart Malotki (1983) shows, however, that Hopi has a number of ways of indicating time (through tense, metaphors about time, words for days, weeks, etc.) and that Whorf's claim was completely without merit. This misinterpretation of another culture's language illustrates how our own cultural perceptions can bias our research; the fact that Whorf's idea was (and continues to be) very popular is testament to how hard our cultural perceptions of language are to dislodge, even in the face of contradictory evidence.

So, if language doesn't determine how we think, at least to the degree that Whorf claimed, what is its role in shaping or influencing how we think? First of all, it is clear from what we've discussed so far that language *underspecifies* meaning. That is, we often mean something quite different and more complex from what we actually say based on the meanings of our words. Second, think of the examples of children, aphasics, savants, and others we discussed in Chapter 2. We saw that children acquiring language (and thus without it, at least in its full form) certainly think and communicate. Broca's aphasics are often frustrated precisely because they have many things on their minds that they can't convey given their speech impairments. They are, however, *thinking*, even without language. The opposite is true as well; remember, children with Williams syndrome can talk fluently and with great expression, but their ability to perform other very simple cognitive tasks that require reason are dramatically impaired. And then there's Christopher, the linguistic savant who can

hwaet!

In 2010 Hofstra University began offering the first master's degree program in the USA that specializes in forensic linguistics. http://www.hofstra.edu/Home/News/PressReleases/112210_MAIinForensicLinguistics.html

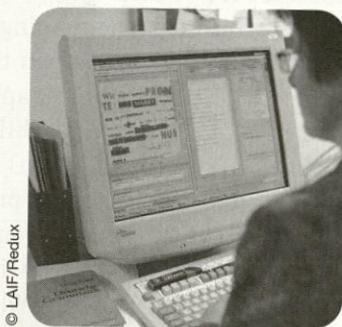
speak several languages fluently but whose other cognitive abilities are severely impaired. Also, just consider actual grammatical differences. Does the fact that a French speaker puts adjectives after the noun rather than before it, as we English speakers do, indicate a difference in perception of the world? How would that perception be characterized? Where do we draw the line between where language does or does not influence thought? Does each grammatical difference among languages illustrate some kind of difference in perception, and if so, why can we translate ideas from one language into another?

Mentalese

If language doesn't shape our thought, what does? Researchers such as Jerry Fodor (1975) and Neil Stillings and colleagues (1995) argue for a "language of thought," what Steven Pinker calls *mentalese*. All of us, as humans, have the same basic program and use the same basic processes of memory and reasoning, regardless of culture. Some have argued that these mental representations have a sort of grammar of their own, a system based on propositional meanings such as those discussed earlier in the chapter. So, we actually think in mentalese rather than in language, and this accounts for the similar ways in which we construct meaning, regardless of language, and for the fact that language doesn't always capture what we mean. In the words of Pinker (1994: 82): "Knowing a language, then, is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa."

RPE 10.17

Accent on Forensic Linguistics



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Because so much of the legal system depends on language both oral and written, it is not surprising that linguistics can provide great insights into the nature and interpretation of legal language and the law. Forensic linguistics is a subfield of linguistics that focuses on the interface of language, the law, and crime. Peter Tiersma (1999) discusses a number of ways in which language and law intersect. One area of study is the history of legal language in English and the influence

of Latin and French—in such terms as *quid pro quo*, *habeas corpus*, *post-mortem*, and *pro bono*, as well as many more common legal terms such as *court*, *justice*, *judge*, *jury*, *decision*, *legal*, *dismiss*, and *jurisdiction*. Tiersma also analyzes lawyers' syntax, including the avoidance of pronouns in legal documents (*the respondent agrees that the respondent will pay . . .*); the use of passive voice to foreground, for example, the victim of an alleged crime and (sometimes purposely) to obscure the perpetrator (*the vehicle was stolen at 5:30 p.m.*); the purpose of archaic terms such as *aforesaid* and *to wit*; and the use of ritualistic language (*All rise . . .*) in order to be precise and to avoid ambiguity. Lexical semantics can be key in deciding a case; for example, whether something is interpreted as *obscene* or *profane* depends on how those terms are defined.

In another branch of forensic linguistics, the language of legal process, experts examine language as it is used in cross-examination, police interviews, the questioning process in court, and evidence presentation, among other contexts. Pragmatics is an essential part of interpreting courtroom discourse; much of what we mean is implied rather than stated, and differences between literal and nonliteral meaning can complicate what it means to tell the truth. Whether a witness is considered believable can also depend on that person's social status, which can be conveyed by accent or dialect just as much as by clothing and appearance.

And finally, linguists like Roger Shuy, Robert Leonard (who used to sing in the doo-wop

band Sha Na Na!), and Robert Rodman provide evidence and expert testimony in cases involving trademark disputes, identification of authors of anonymous texts (such as ransom notes or letters of threat), tracing a speaker's linguistic origins (in the cases of asylum seekers), acoustic analysis of audio-recorded evidence, cross-cultural communication facilitation, and a number of other areas. The photo shows a German federal officer analyzing the grammar in a blackmail letter.

The study of language and the law includes a vast array of topics, such as the language of perjury, language rights (language policies such as the official English movement, bilingual issues, and language preservation), how to improve jury instructions, and even lawyer jokes!

For more information

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Summary

We've seen that beyond the meanings of words, we also construct meaning from sentences and from the context in which sentences are uttered. Understanding and using a language involves a complex interplay of social and linguistic factors, including our cultural expectations, attitudes about

power and solidarity, social conventions, and much more. We've discussed in previous chapters how children acquire a complex grammatical system, and now you can see that in addition to that system, another aspect of language that we seem to acquire is social—how to interact in conversations, manipulate politeness conventions, produce and understand direct and indirect speech acts, and so on. Learning to use language may be as complex a process as acquiring the language itself, and both are essential components of our linguistic knowledge. The interaction between meaning and context raises the question of how context, or culture, shapes meaning and language. We've explored here some of the research on the ways in which language might (and might not) shape how we think and view the world.

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Review, Practice, and Explore

RPE 10.1

Propositions and Truth Conditions

Which of the following sentences contain propositions? Which propositions are true, and which are false?

- a. Eat your cereal!
- b. Did you eat your cereal?
- c. I ate cereal this morning.
- d. I didn't eat cereal this morning.
- e. The dog ate cereal this morning.
- f. The dog ate cereal this morning, didn't he?
- g. Should dogs eat cereal?
- h. Dogs never eat cereal.

RPE 10.2 Analytic and Synthetic Sentences

Label the following sentences as analytic (A) or synthetic (S).

- a. Lions are felines.
- b. Lions are carnivores.
- c. Lions can be fierce.
- d. Lions live only in certain parts of the world.
- e. Lions are animals.
- f. I like lions.
- g. You don't like lions.

RPE 10.3 Entailment

Write down as many entailments as you can for the following sentences. A sentence may have more than one entailment or may have no entailments.

- a. Lions are animals.
- b. Lions live only in certain parts of the world.
- c. Lions are carnivorous.
- d. Lorraine is my mother's sister.
- e. Lorraine is my friend.

Do the following sentences have the same entailments? Why or why not?

- f. The puppy devoured the pizza.
- g. The puppy ate the pizza.

What entailments are expressed by the following ambiguous sentence?

- h. The movie star met the journalist in a tux.

Paraphrase the following sentences. Remember that paraphrases have the same meaning but different word order, and any entailments remain the same.

- i. Lorraine loves going to the Bahamas in the winter.
- j. The baby gave the rattle to his mother.
- k. The students handed in their papers.
- l. The ball rolled under the bed.

RPE 10.4 Contradictions

Make up three sentences that are contradictions because of the interplay of words that express logical relationships, such as *all*, *every*, *some*, *and*, *or*, *but*, and *if*.

RPE 10.5 Presupposition

Some of the following sentences include presuppositions. Write the presupposition down for each sentence. What propositions do we infer or assume in each sentence?

- a. Do you want to go bowling again?
- b. Her husband is a banker.
- c. Have you stopped eating meat?

- d. Do you eat meat?
- e. Why did you steal the money?
- f. Einstein discovered relativity.
- g. I have already donated to the cause.

RPE 10.6 Thematic Roles

Assign the most appropriate thematic role to each of the underlined NPs:

- a. Francine rode her bike to the party.
- b. Elvis ate peanut butter with a spoon.
- c. Bess gave the waitperson a nice tip.
- d. Ariadne saw the dog at the pound.

Make up sentences in each of which *the child* is the subject but in which it has a different thematic role in each case. You'll have to change the verb in each sentence you make up.

- a. *The child* saw the teacher leave the building.
experiencer
- b. *The child*
agent
- c. *The child*
patient
- d. *The child*
goal

RPE 10.7 Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

Identify each of the following as a direct or an indirect speech act. Explain briefly why you identify them as you do. Does sentence type correlate with meaning?

1. Please read the assigned reading by Monday.
2. Could you pick up the trash over there?
3. Did you see the movie last night?
4. I would like to know how many of you finished the assignment.
5. Do your chores!
6. Do you want that window open?
7. Move your car out of the way!
8. Can you please move your car?
9. Please move your car.
10. Your car is in the way.

RPE 10.8 Performative Speech Acts

Speech acts are called *performative* when uttering them is an act in itself rather than reporting on an act. For example, if someone says "I saw a cat run under the porch," they are asserting that they saw this event and are reporting on it. If a judge in court says "I order you to spend six days in jail," that statement performs an action: It legally binds you to serve your jail time. Which of

the following speech acts are performative? (*Hint: You can usually insert hereby in performative speech acts but not in nonperformative ones.*) What conditions must be satisfied for these acts to be performative? Are there conditions under which the sentence would *not* be performative? Explain briefly.

- a. John hopes to be there on time.
- b. SAFE! (yelled by the umpire in a baseball game)
- c. I christen you the H.M.S. *Titanic*.
- d. I will pay you the money I owe you.
- e. I promise to pay you the money I owe you.
- f. Yesterday, Joe promised to pay the money he owes Jack.
- g. Did Joe promise to pay Jack the money he owes him?
- h. Louise knows that pigs can fly.
- i. Joachim decreed that pigs can fly.

Performatives can be rather tricky. Discuss some of the issues that are raised when we try to determine whether the following sentences are performative.

- j. Checkmate! (spoken by a player in a chess game who has checkmated his opponent)
- k. Checkmate! (spoken by a player in a chess game who has not checkmated his opponent)
- l. Checkmate! (spoken in a context other than a chess game)

RPE 10.9 Grice's Maxims of Conversation

- A. Make up a (plausible) conversational exchange in which Grice's maxims are followed. Explain briefly how each maxim is satisfied.
- B. Come up with a (plausible) conversation in which at least one of Grice's maxims is violated. Explain why the violation might take place and what inferences the speakers and hearers could use to make sense of the utterances. (Remember that a violation doesn't necessarily mean that the conversation breaks down; it is often the result of *maxim clash*, wherein a maxim is violated but the cooperative principle maintained.)
- C. Now, come up with an example of a conversational exchange in which at least one of Grice's maxims is flouted. Does the conversation break down or not? Explain briefly.

RPE 10.10 Positive and Negative Politeness

Referring to Table 10.2, make up one conversation in which a speaker uses positive politeness and one in which a speaker uses negative politeness, and then answer the following questions:

- A. How does context influence the situation?
- B. What is the relationship between the two speakers, and does that matter?
- C. In what kinds of situations are we more likely to use positive politeness, and in what situations might we use negative politeness?
- D. In your conversations, what are some examples of direct and indirect speech acts?

RPE 10.11 Gender Differences in Conversation

It has long been argued that men and women have different speech styles and conversational practices. More recent work in language and gender studies has shown, however, that

generalizations about men and women are impossible and that gender interacts with a number of other variables, such as age, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, in shaping our speech styles and practice. What are some current issues and arguments about gendered language? Is it possible to claim that men and women talk differently and use different conversational and politeness strategies? (Some good resources include Cameron 2007, Tannen 2006, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003, and Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998.)

RPE 10.12 Terms of Address

One way to express status and respect in English is with terms of address. Perhaps as a reflection of changing attitudes about such relationships, however, this system is in a state of flux, leaving many of us unsure of how to address certain people. These days, more adults are likely to be called by their first names by children; use of the terms *Mr.* and *Ms.* is waning. Even in elementary and secondary schools, teachers are asking their students to call them by their first names. For many, this confusion about what to call someone can result in “no-naming,” calling that person by no name at all! College professors frequently experience this situation if they haven’t told their students what they would like to be called. Discuss what factors you use when trying to determine how to address someone; consider age, gender, occupation, and level of schooling, among other factors. Is there a situation in which you choose the no-naming strategy? Why? Is politeness at work?

RPE 10.13 Style-Shifting: Conversational Register

We shift registers often and unconsciously, depending on where we are, who we’re talking to and why, and so on. Describe three different registers you might use and the context in which you would use each. Describe the context, the speakers involved, and any other factors that you think contribute to your choice of register. What kinds of vocabulary, sentence structure, accent, and so forth do you use in shifting from one register to another? Give examples to illustrate. (*Hints:* Do you use contractions such as *gonna* or *wanna* in one register but not another? When would you choose a more formal term over a more informal one? In what situations would you use euphemisms? When do you say *yeah*, and when are you careful to say *yes* or maybe even *yes, ma’am*?)

RPE 10.14 Cross-Cultural Conversations

What are some of the conversational practices of a culture other than your own? Do the maxims of conversation seem to apply as they do in your own speech community? Give examples of how maxims might be violated, flouted, or even maintained in different ways in another cultural context. Discuss cross-cultural differences in politeness conventions such as honorifics, terms of address, and other conversational practices. Are direct and indirect speech acts used in different ways?

RPE 10.15 Definiteness and Geographical Place Names

Do you say *Rocky Mountains* or *the Rocky Mountains*? Most native English speakers agree that *the Rocky Mountains* sounds better than *Rocky Mountains* when referring to the geographical location. Likewise, *Lookout Mountain* somehow sounds better than *the Lookout Mountain*. For the following list of place names and your local landmarks, do they sound better with or without the definite determiner *the*?

Great Salt Lake
 Lake Whatcom
 Colorado River
 Mississippi River
 Nooksack River
 Black Hills
 Nob Hill
 Eagle Lake
 Whatcom Creek
 Heron Creek

What is the rule that determines whether *the* occurs with a proper name for a natural landmark? Discuss why you think this might be.

RPE 10.16 Deixis

Explain how each of the following sentences uses deixis.

- We're going on vacation this summer.
- I walked to the store.
- I walked from the store.
- I walk to the store.
- Come on over here!
- John bought that new car.
- The cat is over there behind the couch.

RPE 10.17 Language and Thought

Pullum (1991) outlines the development of the myth, based on “research” by Benjamin Whorf, that “Eskimos” (a misnomer right there) have “bucketloads” of words for snow and that this is evidence for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Research this myth (using resources in addition to Pullum’s book). What evidence is there against Whorf’s claim?