

# (Mis)communication in interaction

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?? What is 'successful communication'?

“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an **ideal speaker-listener**, in a completely **homogeneous speech-community**, who knows its language perfectly and is **unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions** as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language **in actual performance.**” (Chomsky 1965: 1)

## A theory of meaning...

- ▶ describes how people use and understand language in everyday conversation (cognitive reality)
- ▶ describes how language (sentences, utterances, discourses) relate to the world
- ▶ is normative, and thus has predictive power

## Meaning<sub>NN</sub>

'A meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x' is (roughly) equivalent to  
'A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the  
recognition of this intention'. (Grice 1957: 220)

- ▶ Meaning arises through the **speaker** having a specific **meaning intention**

- ★ To what extent is an account of *speaker meaning* an appropriate starting point for a theory of communication?
- ★ To what extent is the *utterance* an appropriate unit of investigation for a theory of communication?

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- ▶ To motivate a radical contextualist approach to meaning, and to show that a 'meaning-in-use' conception is compatible with linguistic theorisation
- ▶ To show that current assumptions about 'successful communication' do not adequately describe what is going on in actual communication
- ▶ To show that an adequate theory of meaning has to look at patterns of language use – including cases of 'imperfect communication'

## ★ **Part I**

Theoretical background: From Grice to Radical Contextualism

## ★ **Part II**

Problems with the status quo in semantic theory: Insights from ethnomethodology



Grice (1975, 1978)

## Example

A: Do you want to go to a party tonight?

B: I have an exam tomorrow.

## B's meanings

**Sentence meaning:** The speaker has an exam tomorrow  
(**what is said**)

**Speaker meaning:** The speaker does not want to go to the party  
(**what is implicated**)

▶  $\text{Meaning}_{\text{NN}} = \text{what is said} + \text{what is implicated}$

## What is said

“the particular meanings of the elements of *S* [the sentence], their order, and their syntactical character” (Grice 1975: 87)

- Sentence meaning corresponds to *what is said*, i.e. the semantic, truth-conditional meaning
- Two-tiered picture of meaning (in today's terminology: semantic minimalism)
- *What is said* includes disambiguation and reference assignment (e.g. of indexicals) (Grice 1978)
- Reference assignment requires recourse to **context**

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## Example

- Every bottle **on the table** is empty.
- Jonny fell off his bike and **as a result** broke his leg.
- Some **but not all** cats are black.

- There are covert 'slots' in the logical form
- These slots are filled 'bottom-up' by appeal to context (e.g. Stanley 2002; Stanley & Szabó 2000)

## Example

Every bottle **on the table** is empty

- ▶ Pragmatics is only called upon when the linguistic system demands it
- ▶ When the linguistic system demands it, pragmatics is required

- Not all pragmatic processes are mandated by covert variables; pragmatic processes can also be **optional**
- The logical form of an uttered sentence can be **enriched** or **modulated** to determine truth-conditional content (e.g. Recanati 2010 among many others)

## Example

- I haven't had breakfast **today / this morning**
- I am eating **now / later / spaghetti**

“Semantic interpretation remains *grammar-driven* even if, in the course of semantic interpretation, pragmatics is appealed to not only to assign contextual values to indexical and free variables but also to freely modulate the senses of the constituents in a top-down manner.” (Recanati 2010: 10)

- ▶ Free enrichment is not **governed** by the grammar
- ▶ Free enrichment is nevertheless **constrained** by the grammar

## Example

- I would be grateful if you could open the window  
*Please open the window*
  - If possible, I'd like these done by Wednesday  
*Get these done by Wednesday*
  - There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some  
*Help yourself to a biscuit*
- 
- Sometimes the proposition expressed goes beyond enriching the extant logical form of the utterance / modulating senses of individual words

## Example

- Child: Can I go punting?  
Mother: You are too small.
- The child is too small to go punting.
- **The child cannot go punting.**

(Jaszczolt 2010: 195)

- ▶ A theory of meaning should be concerned with “the full, intuitively most plausible, meaning as intended by language users on a particular occasion.” (Jaszczolt 2016: 8)



## Recanati (2005), on 'Meaning Eliminativism'

"we don't need linguistic meanings even to serve as input to the construction process. The senses that are the words' contributions to contents are constructed, but the construction can proceed without the help of conventional, context independent word meanings."

## Wittgenstein (1953), *PI* 43

"the meaning of a word is its use in the language"

- By definition, occasionalism does not lend itself to theorisation
- If meaning is constrained by use, we cannot abstract meanings from, e.g. an independent lexicon or grammar
- All we can do is describe the meanings that individual instances of language use give rise to

- An occasion-based conception of meaning can be married with a formalisation when we relativise acts of communication to **model communicators**
- In other words, semantic theory should be concerned with the **ideal speaker-listener** (cf. Chomsky 1965)

## A theory of meaning...

- ▶ describes how people use and understand language in everyday conversation (cognitive reality)
- ▶ describes how language (sentences, utterances, discourses) relate to the world
- ▶ **is normative, and thus has predictive power**

Default Semantics aims to “offer a formal account of how a Model Speaker constructs meaning in his/her head, and how a Model Addressee recovers this intended message.” (Jaszczolt 2016: 10)

- A radical version of semantic contextualism in which the truth-conditional unit pertains to the **primary, intended content** of the utterance
- To generate such a unit, the logical form of the utterance may be enriched **or even overridden**

DS identifies 5 sources of information that interact to generate the PM:

- Word meaning and sentence structure (WS)
  - Situation of discourse (SD)
  - World knowledge (WK)
  - Stereotypes about society and culture (SC)
  - Properties of the human inferential system (IS)
- ▶ Word meaning and sentence structure are not given any priority in determining *what is said*
- ▶ In different contexts of utterance, different sources may take precedence over others

- In traditional Gricean pragmatics, there are two layers of meaning: *what is said* + *what is implicated*
- This corresponds to 'literal' explicit content, versus 'non-literal' implicit content
- In Default Semantics, the primary / secondary meaning divide **cuts across** the explicit / implicit divide
- Primary meanings take on the status of *what is said* which is the semantic, truth-conditional content of the utterance
- Secondary meanings roughly correspond to what is implicated ('implicatures')

## Conditional sentences in English

'If  $p$ , (then)  $q$ '

## Example

(1) If you drop the vase, it will break

We know that in addition to the standard 'conditional' use, conditional sentences can be put to many other uses

## Example

- I would be grateful if you could open the window
- If possible, I'd like these done by Wednesday
- There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some

In addition to the standard 'if  $p$ ,  $q$ ' sentence form, conditionals can also be expressed in other ways

## Example

- Take one more step and I'll shoot
- Your money or your life
- Are you hungry? Have some food



## Example

- If you'd like to put on your helmet

...that'd be great

...you'll be safer

...you won't get caught

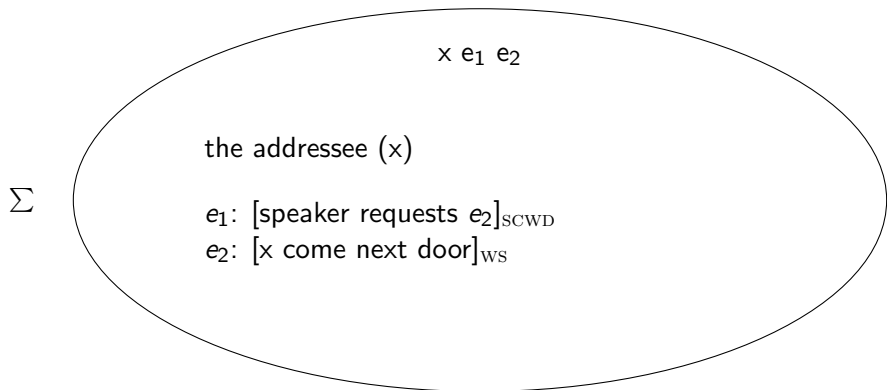
- Please put on your helmet

- ▶ There need not be one single consequent recoverable from the context
- ▶ There may not be an intention of a consequent
- ▶ No 'completion' is required for meaning recovery

- ★ The relationship between  $p$  and  $q$  of a conditional sentence does not always correspond to the main intended meaning of the utterance
- ★ There is no one-to-one correspondence between conditional sentences and conditional thoughts
- ★ The semantics of conditionals has to go beyond the form of the conditional sentence

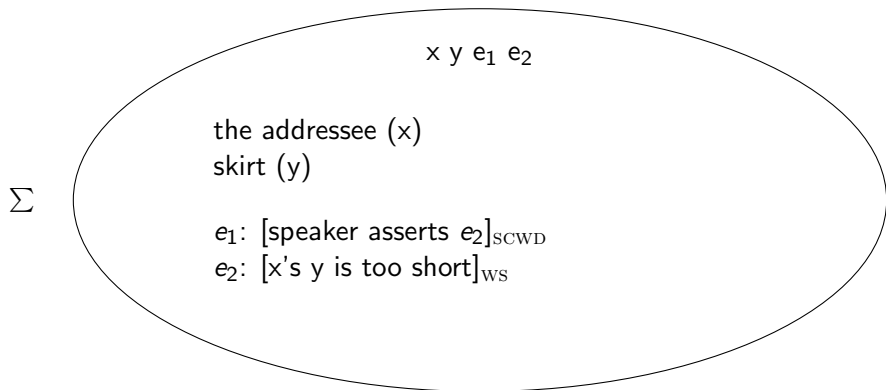
(2) If you'd come like to come next door we'll just examine you

**PM: Please come next door**



(3) Very short skirt on if you don't mind me saying

**PM: Your skirt is too short**



- ▶ An attempt at cognitive reality
- ▶ Unit of truth-conditional analysis is result of contextual information
- ▶ Word meanings interact with other sources of information to generate intended meaning
- ▶ A completely pragmatic, contextually-driven theory of communication

- ★ The form-meaning mismatch is ubiquitous in everyday conversation
- ★ The most promising approach to an explanatorily adequate theory of communication takes a radical contextualist outlook
- ★ We can theorise about 'occasion meaning' when we relativise acts of communication to model communicators

To repeat, Default Semantics aims to

“offer a formal account of how a Model Speaker constructs meaning in his/her head, and how a Model Addressee recovers this intended message.” (Jaszczolt 2016: 10)

- Such an aim is grounded in the traditional notion of meaning<sub>NN</sub>
- By focussing on Model Speakers and Hearers, the onus is taken away from *actual* speakers and hearers
- Not concerned with actual interpretations of meanings on specific occasions; rather, with **identifying general mechanisms in meaning comprehension**

“conversational breakdown and miscommunication have to, by definition, fall outside a theory of what interactants rationally do; they have to be accounted for by a psycholinguistic theory rather than theoretical, philosophical semantics.”

“One can have either (a) a semantic theory or (b) psycho- and sociolinguistic explanations of miscommunication, but not both at once.”  
(Jaszczolt 2012: 98)



- ★ Explanations of miscommunication can – and should – inform semantic theory

## Example

MP: have a biscuit.

MH: ↑o:h okay ↑yeah. ↑thank you.

...

MP: ((while eating)) oh.(0.8)

MH: [°mm°

MP: [I don't have got any bread 'n butter plates but (0.4) **there's one in the cupboard if you want one.**

MH: Mm? o::h should be okay. I'll ju-

MP: you [alright?]

MH: [do ya ] did you want one?

MP: yea- () well it is less messier actually =

MH: = okay.

(adapted from Haugh 2009: 98)

- On the current post-Gricean story, **successful communication** occurs when speakers' intentions align with hearers' inferences
- If this doesn't happen, we would expect there to be a communication breakdown / miscommunication
- However, meanings do not always arise on an utterance-by-utterance time frame
- Instead, meanings can emerge over an interaction
- But just because a speaker's intention did not align with hearer's inference *at the time of utterance*, does not mean there was communication breakdown

- ▶ The input to theorising should be observations of actual language use
- ▶ To give a generalisation of patterns of language use that reflects actual language use, we cannot constrain our observations to cases of 'perfect' language comprehension

- ★ How far do speakers' intentions have to align with hearer's inferences for communication to remain unhindered?
- ★ To what extent do meanings arise on an utterance-by-utterance basis?

- ▶ One utterance can be used to express any number of implicatures
- ▶ How determinate these implicatures are can range from strong to weak

## Relevance Theory (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1986/95; Moeschler 2012)

- **Strong implicatures** are the responsibility of the speaker; they are usually determinate in content
- **Weak implicatures** are less determinate and are the responsibility of the hearer to recover
- **What is communicated**, i.e. semantic content, is determined by the **hearer's** recognition of the speaker's intentions

## Elective construals

“speakers deliberately offer their addressees a choice of construals, so when addressees make their choice, they **help determine what the speaker is taken to mean.**” (Clark 1997: 588)

## Accepted misconstruals

“speakers present an utterance with one intention in mind, but when an addressee misconstrues it, they change their minds and **accept the new construal.**” (Clark 1997: 589)

## Clark (1979)

200 managers of local restaurants were asked: "Do you accept credit cards?"

- 44% responded **Yes, we do**
- 16% responded **We accept Visa and Mastercard**
- 38% responded **Yes, we accept Visa and Mastercard**

- ▶ In each case, the speaker's 'meaning' was determined by the manager choosing one of the available options



## Example

D: Like it's his own bed-sit and he rents out three bedrooms

A: It's shared but... Oh right.

B: *Is that sort of official or...?*

A: No.

D: Well no

B: I don't know how it works

A: But a lot of people do that sort of thing you know.

(Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 257)

## Example

- 1 Is that sort of official or... [perhaps I shouldn't have asked?]
- 2 Is that sort of official or... [perhaps 'being official' is not relevant in this situation?]
- 3 Is that sort of official or... [do we have to register it somewhere?] (when clearly intended as exclusive)
- 4 Is that sort of official or... [is this in the contract?] (when clearly intended as inclusive)

(Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 258)

“When the disjunction is open-ended, the speaker allows the addressee some freedom of choice concerning the types and the range of possible completions” (Jaszczolt et al. 2016: 259)

## Example

Between Clark and a Waitress

W: And what would you like to drink?

C: Hot tea, please. Uh, English breakfast.

W: That was Earl Grey?

C: Right.

"I initially intended to be taken as meaning one thing, but I changed my mind. Speakers may accept a misconstrual because they deem it too trivial, disrupting, or embarrassing to correct. Still, once it is grounded, **it is taken to be what they mean.**" (Clark 1997: 589)

- ▶ The hearer's understanding determines the speaker's meaning

- On the post-Gricean account, meanings are determined by the speaker's determinate intention
- Modelling hearers' comprehension gets around the fact that speakers do not always have determinate intentions (e.g. Relevance Theory)
- Similarly, theorising about Model Speakers gets around the problem in virtue of the fact that Model Speakers would have determinate intentions!
- Alternatively, instead of theorising about speakers' intended meanings or hearers' recovered meanings, we can theorise about the meaning that is **co-constructed by participants**

When my friend and I play a Mozart duet on the piano, we have to coordinate our individual actions: “Each decision – when to begin, how fast to go, when to slow down or speed up, when to play forte and when pianissimo, how to phrase things – must be a joint one, or the result won’t be Mozart.” (Clark 1996: 18)

“Conversational speech is full of disfluencies, which actually help listeners parse utterances and determine what speakers mean. Listeners also recognise that speakers can change their mind and leave part of the construal of utterances to them.” (Clark 1997: 589)

- ★ Indeterminate intentions do not necessarily lead to communication breakdown
- ★ A formal theory of meaning does not need to – and should not – be committed to the idea that speakers have determinate intentions—not even Model Speakers!

- Semantic minimalism (and contextualism) is concerned with the (uttered) **sentence** as the unit of analysis
- Discourse Representation Theory (Kamp & Reyle 1993): concerned with coherence of discourses (from a grammar-based point of view)
- Dynamic Syntax (Kempson et al. 2001): acknowledges that structures are co-constructed over time
- And Default Semantics: takes on board whatever part of speech it is that expresses a complete thought—from a morpheme to a complete discourse

## Example

T: Y'd of probly heard fr'm im already. (0.9)

M: i-Ya:h. (0.4)

T: If 'e hadn' gotten a li:ft (0.2)

M: Ri:ght.

(Schegloff 1996: 74)

- T's first utterance could plausibly have been considered to be 'complete'
- However, his second utterance continues from the first
- In this case, the main clause of the *conditional* was uttered first, followed later by the subordinate clause
- In order to evaluate the *thought* as conditional, both utterances would have to be taken into consideration



Schegloff et al. (1996: 40)

“The meaning of any single grammatical construction is interactionally contingent, built over interactional time in accordance with interactional actualities... The meaning of an entire utterance is a complex, not well understood, algorithm of these emergent, non-linear, sense-making interactions.”

## Example

Telephone conversation

G: ...d'ju see me pull up?=  
S: =.hhh No:. I w'z trying you all day.=en the line w'z busy fer like hours.

G: Ohh:::::, ohh:::::, hhhhh We::ll, hhh I'm go'nna c'm over in a little while help yer brother ou:t

S: Goo[:d

G: [.hh Cus I know he needs some he::lp,

S: .hh Ye:ah. Yes he'd mention'that tihday.=

G: =Mm hm.=

S: =.hh Uh:m, .tlk .hhh Who wih yih ta:lking to.

(Heritage 1990/1991: 317)

“I w’z trying you all day.=en the line w’z busy fer like hours”

## Interpretation 1:

- There was a potential implicature ‘who were you talking to?’ which was not picked up on
- The implicature was reinforced directly with “Who wih yih ta:lking to” later on

## Interpretation 2:

- G questions the motivation for the call with ‘d’ju see me pull up?’
- S could then be offering an explanation for why she is calling now
- G could then be a response to an alternative implicature, namely that G has not yet helped S’s brother

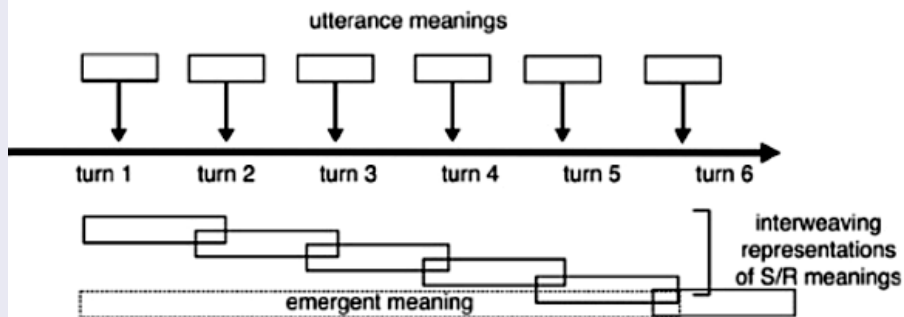
(Heritage 1990/1991; Haugh 2008)

- Interpretation 1 is only possible in view of the subsequent utterance
- Taking on board interpretation 1 could suggest that there was a miscommunication when the initial implicature was not acknowledged
- ▶ Meanings cannot always be evaluated on an utterance-by-utterance basis

“meaning lies not with the speaker nor the addressee nor the utterance alone as many philosophical arguments have considered, but rather with the interactional past, current, and projected next moment”

(Schegloff et al. 1996: 40)

Kádár & Haugh (2013: 118)



**Incrementality** Meanings are produced incrementally in interaction in light of how utterances are received by other participants

**Sequentiality** Meanings of utterances are understood relative to prior and subsequent talk

## Example

K: If possible, if you could come that would really help us out but

M: Oh, it's tennis. That sounds nice. But Saturday is a bit... What time will it start?

K: Um, I think we'll start from around 10 but

M: Oh, unfortunately I already have plans. I am really sorry but

K: Oh really

M: if there is a chance next time...

(adapted from Haugh 2008: 22)

- According to Haugh, the 'meaning' of the invitation refusal cannot be attributed to one particular utterance of M

2 options:

- ▶ We can try to identify the **meanings of individual utterances** and/or
- ▶ We can try to identify **utterances where meanings are achieved**

- If we start with the **utterance**, we have to acknowledge that meanings may be co-created by participants
- If we start with the **thought**, we have to acknowledge that meanings can be emergent and are not necessarily attributable to specific utterances
- ★ The form-meaning mismatch is well attested in ordinary discourse
- ★ We now also have to consider that there is an **utterance-meaning mismatch**



## A theory of meaning...

- ▶ describes how people use and understand language in everyday conversation (cognitive reality)
  - ▶ describes how language (sentences, utterances, discourses) relate to the world
  - ▶ is normative, and thus has predictive power
- 
- The aim is to identify / explain the general mechanisms that lead to the meaning recovered
  - We not only need to explain the mismatch between sentence forms and utterance meanings
  - But we also need to explain the mismatch between utterance production and meaning generation

- ▶ Only a radical contextualist account of meaning can adequately explain the form-meaning mismatch in ordinary discourse
- ▶ We can theorise about ‘occasion meaning’ when we relativise acts of communication to model communicators—and thus have predictive power
- ▶ However, a theory of *speaker meaning* does not capture the fact that meanings may be co-created between participants
- ▶ Indeterminate intentions do not necessarily lead to communication breakdown

- ▶ In seriously aiming to identify the general mechanisms of language comprehension, we have to depart from the intention=inference model of meaning
  - ▶ To give a generalisation of patterns of language use that reflects actual language use, we cannot constrain our observations to cases of 'perfect' language comprehension
  - ▶ We have to depart from the view that the Model Speaker has one determinate intention
  - ▶ We should represent meanings not of the speaker, nor of the hearer, but of the meaning that is interactionally achieved
- ★ We need to shift the focus of meaning-theorising to acknowledging and understanding the **utterance-meaning mismatch**

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