

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture 1.

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The plan for today: Introduce the topic, and give a brief overview of what the course will look like.

Logistics:

Coursework of two papers of 2400 words each (85%) and a group or individual presentation (15%). There will be a Moodle that will have the readings. In the meantime, check out my website mipmckeever.weebly.com where I'll put information.

First essay, **due 14 October, noon** : 30%. The first essay will be multiple choice. Either a question on Frege's theory of semantics or Grice's theory of pragmatics, or a question devised by the student (and agreed upon by the lecturer/TA).

Second essay, **due 2nd Dec 12 noon**: 55%. The second essay will also be multiple choice. Either a question about semantics or pragmatics, or a question about material from weeks 6-12.

You have to answer questions on at least two topics—[semantics, pragmatics], [pragmatics, semantics], [semantics, applications (6-12)], [pragmatics, applications]. You don't have to answer questions on all three topics.

In-class presentation: 15%. Each student will be responsible for presenting some part of the readings in class. You can do an individual or a group presentation. Some features we'd like from presentations:

- The presentation should be 5 to 10 minutes long
- There is no need to cover the entire reading; just focus on specific section/arguments you find interesting
- *Describe* the reading/section/argument
- *Evaluate* the reading/section/argument. Is there anything you agreed with or disagreed with? Is there anything you found confusing? What do you think is the main message a reader should take from it?

- In philosophy, it's *always* okay to have questions, to be unsure about things. These are hard questions that people have been studying for over a century! Bringing questions to class is a sign you're grappling with the material and strongly encouraged.
- You can use either powerpoint or a handout.

Participation: We would like you to participate in class. However, we know that the pandemic can make attendance difficult, and so, at present, it's not going to figure into your grade. But your engagement with at least some of others' presentations will be considered if you happened to be at grade boundaries. Attendance will be noted, and you should have a reason for not attending a given class that you should convey to one of us.

Tutorials: TBA

Office hours: TBA

Support: Email me any time, with questions either about content or assessment.

Introduction

A science of meaning?

1 I ate enough

2 J'ai assez mangé

3 Ya syel dastatachna

4 Wo chi bao le¹

There's a sense in which these sentences mean the same thing: that you've eaten, and had enough food. But they do it in very different ways. English, French, Russian, and Mandarin have very different grammars. We can see this simply if we try to make it plural: to say *we've ate enough*

1' We ate enough

¹ I'm sorry I don't know the Cantonese (yet!)

*2' Nous ai assez mangé (should be 'nous avons')

*3' Mi syel dastachna (should be 'Mi cyeli')

4' Women chi bao le

(In linguistics, * means bad)

That is to say, different languages have different grammatical rules. A very simple sort of rule, for a given language L:

Rule. L uses the same verb for singular or plural subjects.

While much too simple, 20th century linguistics has uncovered more complicated rules that are very (very!) roughly similar to the above, with Noam Chomsky arguing that there is a universal theory of grammar underlying each of English, French, Russian, and Mandarin (and *every* other language!)

Our questions: is there a science of meaning? Are there rules of meaning? What is meaning anyway? Why does it matter? To answer that, we need to consider the different sorts of meaning philosophers and linguists studied over the 20th century.

Semantics and Pragmatics

Consider two utterances of this sentence:

5. It is snowing today

Imagine they are uttered in these contexts:

c1. It's 7am, and I've just opened the curtains

c2. We're discussing whether or not to go to the beach

Here's a claim:

Claim. In c1, what the sentence means, and what we mean by using it, are the same: in each case, it is simply a report on the condition of the weather. In c2, what the sentence means, and what we mean by using it, are different. What *the sentence* means is to do with the weather. What *we mean* by *using* it is something like 'going to the beach is a terrible idea!!'

For 120 years, people have been trying to assess the merits of **Claim**. Philosophers have done so, linguists have done so, legal scholars have done so, feminist and political philosophers have done so. And we're going to try to do so in this class as well. We're going to present some of the best work done on the topic. That requires us to get clear about what *sentence meaning* is, and what *using language to mean* something is. That is to say, it involves getting clear about the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, between the rules of meaning (if there are any) and the rules of use (if there are any).

Why Care?

The idea of linguistic meaning and use are important for a range of domains. There is philosophy, of course, but it goes much beyond philosophy. Consider four examples:

- **Linguistics.** Is there a clear notion of meaning that can play a role in theoretical linguistics? According to some famous work we'll see in a later lecture, the answer is no. Even though there are rules of grammar, there are no rules of meaning.
- **Law.** In the US, there are a lot of arguments over what the constitution means. According to the second amendment, citizens of the United States have the right to bear arms. It was ratified in 1791, so a long time ago. Some people—they are called originalists—think that the applicability of the constitution to American society depends on what the constitution literally says. Since it literally and only says there's a right to bear arms, there is just that—a right to bear arms, no matter what sort. That's that. Others disagree: they say that we should take the founders' intentions—how they meant the amendment to be understood—and think that the founders wouldn't be happy with a world in which there are submachine guns. According to those second people, we should look beyond the words to the reasons they said what they said, just as we look beyond the words to understand an utterance of 5 in c2.
- **Computer science.** Computers are notoriously literal. Imagine you write a program to count the scores of all ten students in your class. You mean to write:

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For (x=1;x<11;x++): total=total+student_score[x]
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You accidentally write:

```
For (x=1;x<1111;x++): total=total+student_score[x]
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The computer will do what you said, not what you meant, and run over 1,000 times. Maybe that's not a problem,² but what if you're telling a super-powerful AI what to do, and you say 'remove human suffering!' One way to do that is to kill all humans. That's compatible with the literal meaning, and computers are very literal. That's not compatible with use. Seems pretty important!

- **Social philosophy.** For some expressions, it's unclear what the meaning is and what the use is. When I say 'covid kills', what I say seems true even though very very few people who get covid die. When I say 'numbers are prime' I say something false, despite the fact that, just as some people die from covid, some numbers—quite a lot—are prime. Expressions like this are called *generics*, and we don't really know how they work. But that means people can exploit them. A racist politician can say 'Muslims are terrorists' and can sometimes defend themselves by pointing out that they didn't say that all Muslims are terrorists. There are lots of examples like this, and we will consider a range of them.

A taster of semantics

Gottlob Frege is one of the founding fathers of 20th century philosophy. He is also one of the founders of semantics, the theory of meaning. In a later lecture, we'll read some of his work. Here, let's very briefly look at some of his main ideas.

An interesting fact?

Consider:

6. It is Thursday and we are in HKU (✓)

² Though it might be if you're paying for cloud computing!

And consider these variants:

7. It is Wednesday and we are in HKU ✗
8. It is Thursday and we are at Lingnan ✗
9. It is Thursday and we are studying philosophy ✓

A fact: In 6, if you swap one of the sentences for another true sentence, the sentence stays true. If you swap one of them for a false sentence, the whole thing becomes false.

What that suggests is this:

Very Important Principle. The truth of a complex sentence is determined by the truth of its parts.

This is a formulation of what's known as the principle of compositionality, an absolutely fundamental part of the theory of meaning. Another important, and controversial, principle:

Truth and meaning. The meaning of a sentence is just the conditions under which it is true

'I ate enough' is true under the conditions that I ate enough, so those conditions are the meaning of the sentence. What are 'conditions'? Good question! We'll discuss that later.

Another example:

10. Dr McKeever is giving this lecture
11. Matt is giving this lecture

Here is a controversial claim: these sentences, in some important sense, mean the same thing. If you can agree to that, you can agree that in some important sense, 'Dr McKeever' and 'Matt'

mean the same thing. That's plausible: they're both about the same bit of the world, namely me! And surely meaning tracks what a sentence is about. From **Very Important Principle** and the above fact, we can derive a lot of facts about how meaning works.

Functions

In mathematics, a function is something that takes an input and returns an output. Frege's genius idea was to suggest that natural language involves functions:

'And': the function that takes a pair of sentences, and returns the truth-value, True, if they're both true.

'Is giving a lecture': the function that takes a name and returns a truth-value.

Given this, can you work out the function that 'every cat', as it occurs in a sentence like 'every cat purrs' stands for? If you can, you should be teaching this class!

We will later see that within this framework, we can explain a lot of things. We can explain, for example:

- If Alan thinks Beth is happy, she could have been.

That is, we can explain conditionals ('if ... then'), belief contexts (which are weird in interesting ways) and modal contexts ('could have been') all using variations of the ideas sketched here. Part one of this course tells you how this works.

A Taster of Pragmatics

Consider:

12. I ate three cookies (Context: I ate the whole plate)

13. My name is Michael (Context: I, MM, am talking to you)

14. His books' covers are nice and he seems friendly (I'm talking to you about a hotshot novelist we just met)

15. You must meet me by the bank tomorrow at 9pm! (We're somewhere near by both a river bank and an HSBC)

It is arguable that in saying 14 in this context, I somehow *convey to you* that I don't like the novels of the hotshot. But—do you agree?—the sentence 14 doesn't *literally mean* that. Its literal meaning is just about books and friendliness.

These examples generalize, and suggest rules, first formulated by Paul Grice, the second great thinker we'll consider.

Quantity: Give as much information as is relevant

Quality: Say true things

Relevance: say relevant things

Manner: Avoid ambiguity.

The second part of the course will be about the principles of pragmatics, and what that might tell us about the study of meaning.

Applications

With this basic framework, we can start to study language use more precisely, and thus to understand communication and ourselves better. This is the third part of the course, which considers applications of ideas from semantics and pragmatics. Having presented some interesting technical material from linguistics and philosophy, we'll turn to the social world.

We'll consider some of:

- Slurs: people argue whether their meaning of slurs is semantic or pragmatic. We'll look at theories
- Generics: the weirdness of generics has led to a lot of work both about their meaning and their use, and how that impacts the social world.
- Epistemology: around the turn of the twenty-first century, a range of theories of knowledge arose that were based on various theories of the meaning of 'knows' and related words

The Plan

The plan is tentative. If the class is more interested in one bit, we'll focus on that.

Weeks 2&3: Semantics. Frege, Montague, Heim and Kratzer.

Weeks 4&5: Pragmatics. Grice.

Week 6: Review and recap of the first half of course. What we've learned about meaning.

Week 7. The view from linguistics: Chomsky against semantics.

Week 8: 21st century views on the topic. Stanley and Szabo, Cappelen and Lepore

Week 9: Speech acts.

Week 10-12. Social and political consequences (generics, slurs, pornography, political discourse), review, extra topics we end up wanting to study.

Reading for next week:

McKeever, M. 'The Descriptive and Normative Semantics of Social Media'. On my website. Section 2 only.

Optional:

Cappelen, H and Dever, J. *Context and Communication*, chapter 4.

Heim, I, and Kratzer, A. Semantics In Generative Grammar, chapter 1. [available online if you google]

If these latter two are too difficult, don't worry! You only need the rough idea, and if you want to focus on more applied topics, you won't need to know the details. Conversely, if you like technical material, you can write an essay on as technical a subject in semantics as you like.

If you would like to look ahead to what we'll study later in the course, take a look the below:

Davis, W. "Implicature". Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. [available online]

Cappelen, H and Dever, J. *Bad Language*.