

An Introduction to English Semantics
and Pragmatics



An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics

Patrick Griffiths

Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language

General Editor

Heinz Giegerich, Professor of English Linguistics (University of Edinburgh)

Editorial Board

Laurie Bauer (University of Wellington)

Derek Britton (University of Edinburgh)

Olga Fischer (University of Amsterdam)

Norman Macleod (University of Edinburgh)

Donka Minkova (UCLA)

Katie Wales (University of Leeds)

Anthony Warner (University of York)

TITLES IN THE SERIES INCLUDE

An Introduction to English Syntax

Jim Miller

An Introduction to English Phonology

April McMahon

An Introduction to English Morphology

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy

An Introduction to International Varieties of English

Laurie Bauer

An Introduction to Middle English

Simon Horobin and Jeremy Smith

An Introduction to Old English

Richard Hogg

An Introduction to Early Modern English

Terttu Nevalainen

An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics

Patrick Griffiths

Edinburgh University Press

Contents

© Patrick Griffiths, 2006

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

Typeset in Janson and Neue Helvetica
by Norman Tilley Graphics and
printed and bound in Great Britain
by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wilts

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-10 0 7486 1631 4 (hardback)
ISBN-13 978 0 7486 1631 2
ISBN-10 0 7486 1632 2 (paperback)
ISBN-13 978 0 7486 1632 9

The right of Patrick Griffiths
to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

List of figures and tables *Preface*

	viii
	x
1 Studying meaning	1
Overview	1
1.1 Pragmatics distinguished from semantics	4
1.2 Types of meaning	9
1.3 Semantics	15
Summary	21
Exercises	22
Recommendations for reading	23
Notes	23
2 Adjective meanings	24
Overview	24
2.1 Using language to give the meanings of words	24
2.2 Sense relations relevant to adjectives	25
2.3 Constructions with adjectives	34
Summary	38
Exercises	38
Recommendations for reading	40
Notes	40
3 Noun vocabulary	41
Overview	41
3.1 The <i>has</i> -relation	41
3.2 Hyponymy	46
3.3 Incompatibility	52
3.4 Count nouns and mass nouns	54
Summary	56
Exercises	57

4	Verbs and situations	58
	Overview	58
	4.1 Causatives	59
	4.2 Situation types	59
	Summary	60
	Exercises	66
	Recommendations for reading	75
	Notes	75
	Recommendations for reading	76
	Notes	76
5	Figurative language	78
	Overview	78
	5.1 Literal and figurative usage	79
	5.2 Irony, presuppositions and metonymy	82
	5.3 Metaphor	86
	Summary	90
	Exercises	90
	Recommendations for reading	91
	Notes	91
6	Tense and aspect	93
	Overview	93
	6.1 Tense	96
	6.2 Aspect	100
	Summary	107
	Exercises	108
	Recommendations for reading	109
	Notes	109
7	Modality, scope and quantification	110
	Overview	110
	7.1 Modality	111
	7.2 Relative scope	121
	7.3 Quantification	123
	Summary	129
	Exercises	129
	Recommendations for reading	130
	Notes	131

8	Pragmatics	132
	Overview	132
	8.1 Conversational implicature	134
	8.2 Presuppositions	143
	8.3 Speech acts	148
	Summary	153
	Exercises	153
	Recommendations for reading	155
	Notes	155
9	Connecting utterances to the background	157
	Overview	157
	9.1 Definiteness	158
	9.2 Clefts and passives	160
	9.3 Focal stress	167
	Summary	169
	Exercises	170
	Recommendations for reading	171
	Notes	171
	<i>Suggested answers to the exercises</i>	172
	<i>Bibliography</i>	186
	<i>Index</i>	189

8 Pragmatics

Overview

Up to now this book has concentrated on **semantics** – abstract knowledge of word and sentence meaning – though pragmatics was introduced in Chapter 1, as the study of how senders and addressees, in acts of communication, rely on context to elaborate on literal meaning. Pragmatics has been appealed to, for instance in Chapter 5's account of figurative interpretation and in parts of Chapters 6 and 7. It is now time, however, to deal in more detail with the main concepts and principles of pragmatics. This is done in Chapters 8 and 9.

A cluster of theoretical proposals is outlined here that have been developed by linguists and philosophers, for understanding how additional meanings arise when speakers and writers put language to use in context, and for classifying such meanings. Based mainly on proposals by three philosophers – J. L. Austin, H. P. Grice and J. R. Searle – the framework has come into existence over the past forty years and is still actively under development. However, it is the ideas that are going to be described now, rather than their history.¹

One of the basic ideas in pragmatics is, as Levinson (2000: 29) puts it: 'inference is cheap, articulation expensive'. Language users save themselves breath, writing and keyboard effort by producing utterances that deliberately rely on context, allowing receivers to infer information beyond what is laboriously explicit in the signal. Example (8.1) is from a real conversation and it will be used for basic orientation to the three main topics of this chapter. A told B that, on her trip overseas, she had spent some time in hospital. B showed sympathetic interest, which led to the following exchange.

(8.1) A: "I was bitten by something in Berlin Zoo." B: "Was it an insect?"
A: "Yes."

How did B guess that it was an insect? (I have confident intuitions here because I was B.) A's use of the word *something* was an important

semantic clue. *Thing* is a high-level superordinate covering many different more specific words (hyponyms, see Chapter 3): *lawnmower*, *shoe*, *key*, *tiger*, *penguin* and so forth.

At least on a first attempt at making sense of what A had said, B could rule out inanimate objects: familiarity with things in the world (encyclopedic knowledge, Chapters 1 and 3) indicates that they do not have the mouth parts required for the acts denoted by the verb *bite*, though metaphorical interpretations can be imagined, especially for a lawnmower. But was the *something* a tiger, a penguin or some other creature? In Section 8.1, implicature, a type of pragmatic reasoning investigated by H. P. Grice will be explained. Amongst other things, it enables us to see why a relatively uninformative utterance, like "I was bitten by something", when more informative alternatives are at hand (such as *I was bitten by a tiger* or *I was bitten by a giraffe*), systematically invites an inference that the speaker is not in a position to make one of the more informative possible statements, probably because of not knowing. The starting point for the pragmatic inference that A did not know exactly what had bitten her is semantic: alternatives encoded in the language (*thing* and its hyponyms).

Another item of encyclopedic knowledge was involved in the pragmatic interpretation of (8.1): the animals in zoos are usually labelled – for the benefit of those who, for instance, might not recognise an aardvark by its heavy tail or a peccary by its downward pointing tusks. If A did not know what had bitten her, it probably was not one of the animals officially on display. (Further encyclopedic knowledge that could have contributed is the likelihood of an animal bite leaving a visible scar.) If it was not one of the resident animals, then what? An enraged zookeeper or feral child? No, a human biter would have been referred to as *someone* (another instance where semantic distinctions – *someone* as against *something* – are the basis for pragmatic reasoning). There were not many other possibilities; hm – perhaps it was an insect? And, yes, that proved to be so.

Assumptions that speakers and writers make about the background to communication are dealt with in Section 8.2, on presuppositions. In (8.1), after A had used the expression *something* to talk about what bit her, the biter could be treated as a presupposed item of background information and could be referred to using the pronoun *it*, as when B asked "Was it an insect?". (Chapter 9 has more on the role of presuppositions in connecting utterances to previous discourse.)

Section 8.3 is about speech acts. Two different kinds of speech act occur in (8.1): A's statements and B's question. To make a statement is to propose an update to the shared background: 'add to what you know about me that something bit me in Berlin Zoo'; and, in context, A's

eventual “yes” conveyed that she endorsed adding to that knowledge that it was an insect. B’s *yes-no* question bore differently on the background information: ‘I could add to what I know about you that the thing which bit you was an insect; I’d like an indication as to whether that would be true or false’. There are other kinds of speech act too – many of them: advice, threats, apologies and so on.

8.1 Conversational implicature

Conversational implicatures are inferences that depend on the existence of norms for the use of language, such as the widespread agreement that communicators should aim to tell the truth. (It is for historical reasons that *conversational* is part of the label. Implicatures arise as much in other speech genres and in writing as they do in conversation; so they are often just called *implicatures*.) Speakers, writers and addressees assume that everyone engaged in communication knows and accepts the communicational norms. This general acceptance is an important starting point for inferences, even if individuals are sometimes unable to meet the standards or occasionally cheat (for instance, by telling lies). Chapter 5 has already shown that apparent violations of the norm of truthfulness (referred to below as the “quality maxim”) can invite metaphorical interpretation, as when a reader finds a way to reconcile the real-world unlikelihood of someone’s face curdling with an assumption that Jenny Diski aimed to make a true statement when she wrote ‘my mother’s face curdled’.

The inferences called implicatures are ever-present in language use, but, unlike entailments, they are not guarantees. In (8.1) I could have been wrong in my guess – an implicature – that A did not know quite what had bitten her in the zoo, or over the further implicature that it was an insect that had bitten her.

Grice (1975 and elsewhere) identified some of the communicational norms and showed how they are involved in the reasoning that makes it possible for utterances to convey rather more than is literally encoded in the underlying sentences. He proposed that four “maxims” – listed and glossed in (8.2) – could be regarded as the basis for co-operative communication.

(8.2) **Quality** – try to be truthful when communicating.

Quantity – give appropriate amounts of information, not too little and not too much.

Manner – utterances should be clear: brief, orderly and not obscure.²

Relevance³ – contributions should be relevant to the assumed current goals of the people involved.

A **maxim** is a pithy piece of widely-applicable advice, for instance Polonius’ precept to Laertes ‘Give every man thine ear but few thy voice’ (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; not one of Grice’s maxims). Grice’s maxims play an as-if role: he was not putting forward the maxims as advice on how to talk; he was saying that communication proceeds as if speakers are generally guided by these maxims.

Imagine that person X makes the statement in (8.3a) to person Y. Two of several different subsequent things that Y might say are shown in (8.3b, c), one a response to X, the other a statement to someone else. These two possibilities are of interest because both are relatable to the maxim of quality.

- (8.3) a. X to Y: “The Greens will get more votes in the next election.”
 b. Y to X: “What’s the evidence for that?”
 c. Y to Z: “X believes that, come election time, the Greens will get more votes.”

Notation

X uttering “U” +> ‘i’ stands for: language user X producing utterance U implicates proposition i

(This notation is borrowed from Levinson 2000. Recall from Chapter 1 that, when it seems useful to mark distinctions, utterances are enclosed in double quotes, and meanings in single quotes.)

Example: X uttering “The Greens will get more votes” +> ‘X believes that the Greens will get more votes’

Later in this chapter a slightly different symbol +< (my own invention) is used to represent **presupposition**. A reminder: the symbol ⇒ (introduced in Chapter 1) stands for entailment.

People use utterances to communicate. It is speakers and writers who implicate or (to anticipate the other two main topics of this chapter) presuppose and perform speech acts. But it will often be a useful shorthand to say that utterances, or the underlying sentences, or the words in them, carry implicatures (or presuppose various things, or constitute speech acts), so I will sometimes put the implicature symbol +> (or the presupposition symbol +<) between an expression and a meaning (see Stalnaker 1999: 7).

The naturalness of the sequence (8.3a, b) shows that the quality maxim is indeed a factor in communication. General agreement that communication is supposed to be truthful leads to an inference – an implicature – that speakers have justifications for what they assert; otherwise how could they hope to fulfil the quality requirement? In many situations an interlocutor is free to ask about the supporting evidence, and (8.3b) is one way of doing that. The evidence that X cites need not come from statistical analysis of political poll data. It could be based on what a few people at the hairdresser's said. (It is another matter, outside the scope of semantics and pragmatics, whether Y will rate X's reason(s) as persuasive.)

In (8.3c) Y can, quite naturally, report to someone else, Z, what X said as something that X believes, even though X did not say in (8.3a) "It is my belief that ...". This, too, is an implicature deriving from the maxim of quality. Truthfulness is the norm, so speakers making statements should express only propositions that they themselves believe. Thus, in the absence of indications that X was drugged up, talking ironically or telling a joke, it is a fair assumption that X believed the proposition carried by the statement in (8.3a).

In (8.4) Levinson's notation is used to show, in a generalised way, the two quality-maxim implicatures that were exemplified in (8.3).

- (8.4) X stating "U" +> 'X has evidence for the proposition expressed by the utterance U'
 X stating "U" +> 'X believes the proposition expressed by the utterance U'

What the kind of uttering called *stating* amounts to will be examined, along with other speech acts, in Section 8.3. Examples of implicatures grounded in the other maxims of (8.2) are discussed next.

8.1.1 Implicatures from the quantity maxim

An implicature relating to the low end of the quantity maxim – giving too little information – is illustrated in (8.5).

- (8.5) a. "Are you from America?"
 b. "No" followed by silence +> 'I am not willing to talk to you any further'

In Japan, (8.5a) is a fairly common conversation opener addressed to me. The rude implicature is the reason why I have never stopped with the simple answer in (8.5b). "No" would be true, but insufficient; so I go on to say where I am from.

It is not the case that an unadorned "No" is always rude. The preamble

in (8.6) puts the words of (8.5) into a different context, one where the implicature from an unelaborated "No" does not arise.

- (8.6) a. "That is an interesting accent. Let me guess where you are from. Are you from America?"
 b. "No".

After (8.6b) the guessing game can continue without offence given or taken. Implicatures depend on context, which is why they belong in a chapter on pragmatics.

There are sets of words that can be ranked according to informativeness (for instance *excellent* > *good* > *OK*, used in an example in Chapter 1). Such scales support one-way entailment, as in (8.7), where the scale items are identified by being printed in italics.

- (8.7) It was *excellent* ⇒ It was *good* ⇒ It was *OK*
 We brought *three* spare mugs ⇒ We brought *two* spare mugs ⇒ We brought *a* spare mug
 There was an *earthquake* ⇒ There was an *earth tremor*
 I *know* that we've met before ⇒ I *believe* that we've met before
 He *hates* being corrected ⇒ He *dislikes* being corrected
 You are allowed to ask for cereal *and* fruit juice ⇒ You are allowed to ask for cereal *or* fruit juice

Scales like these regularly invite quantity-maxim implicatures going in the reverse direction of the entailment arrows. Implicatures arrived at in this way are always negative. See (8.8).

- (8.8) We brought a spare mug +> 'We did not bring more than one spare mug'
 There was an earth tremor +> 'It was not violent enough to be called an earthquake'
 I believe ... +> 'I'm not certain enough to say that I know ...'
 He dislikes ... +> 'It would be too strong to say that he hates being corrected'
 (First line of breakfast menu:) CEREAL OR FRUIT JUICE +> 'You mustn't choose both cereal and fruit juice'

The possibility of cancellation without contradiction, as in (8.9), confirms their status as implicatures rather than entailments.

- (8.9) We brought a spare mug, or perhaps even two or three of them.
 I believe we've met before; in fact I'm certain of it.
 He dislikes being corrected; as a matter of fact he hates it.
 Waiter (brushing aside an implicature from the menu's CEREAL

OR FRUIT JUICE): “You’d like both cereal and fruit juice – not a problem.”

Implicatures can derive from the other end of the quantity maxim – avoid giving too much information – as illustrated in (8.10).

- (8.10) A: “Can anyone use this car park?”
 B: “It’s for customers of the supermarket.” +> ‘No’

If the car park was for the use of everyone, then that would include the supermarket’s customers and there would be no need to mention them; so B’s utterance appears to offer superfluous information. An assumption that B is abiding by the quantity maxim – and therefore not giving more information than needed – invites an implicature that it is necessary to specify supermarket customers – it is for them and not for other motorists, which amounts to an informative negative answer to A’s question.

Two features of implicature can be observed in (8.10). Firstly, implicatures provide ways of communicating indirectly, and indirectness can be employed for politeness. B’s answer is polite, whereas just saying “No” would have been rude (see the discussion of (8.5)). Secondly, being based on an implicature – rather than an entailment – the ‘no’ meaning conveyed by B’s answer is not guaranteed to be true; it could be overridden, for instance, by B adding “but when it’s only half full, like today, we never make an issue over anyone else parking here”.

8.1.2 Implicatures from manner

The sentences in (8.11) illustrate a distinction mentioned in Chapter 4, between direct causation (a) and indirect causation (b).

- (8.11) a. Helen switched the lights off.
 b. Helen caused the lights to go off. +> ‘She did it in an unusual way’

Part of Grice’s maxim of manner (see 8.2) makes brevity a goal. The indirect causative (8.11b) is longer than the direct causative (8.11a). Both sentences entail that the lights went off. The normal way to make lights go off is to operate the switch. Levinson (2000: 136) summarises the effect of departing from the manner norms as follows: ‘What is said in an abnormal way indicates an abnormal situation ...’ Unusual ways of putting out the lights include overloading the circuits by starting up a pottery kiln, or singing a high enough note to shatter the bulbs. However, as with all implicatures, it is merely a reasoned guess that Helen did not switch

them off in the usual way: *Helen caused the lights to go off by flicking the switch in the normal way* is not a contradiction. (Why would anyone want to use a sentence like that? Maybe it could be an explanation to someone who was surprised at the lights going out, had not seen Helen flick the switch and was suggesting that a poltergeist might have been responsible.)

According to the maxim of manner, our speech (and written utterances) should also be orderly. What this means can be illustrated with the examples in (8.12).

- (8.12) a. We sold our car and bought a tandem bicycle.
 +> ‘Car sale before buying of tandem’
 +> ‘Car sale led to buying of tandem’
 b. We bought a tandem bicycle and sold our car.
 +> ‘Tandem bought before car was sold’
 +> ‘Tandem purchase had car sale as a consequence’
 c. You asked what happened last summer: we sold our car and bought a tandem bicycle. The two transactions came through on the same day, but they were unrelated; we’d begun separate negotiations for them weeks beforehand.
 d. We didn’t buy a tandem and sell the car – we wouldn’t have been able to afford to do that; we sold the car and then bought the tandem.
 e. Her name is Moira and his name is Jon.

In (8.12a, b) *and* seems to mean ‘and then’, or even ‘and consequently’, but (8.12c) is evidence that these additional interpretations are implicatures, not inherent aspects of the meaning of *and*. Implicatures can be cancelled without contradiction and that is what could be done by the long-winded supplements that turn (8.12a) into (8.12c). Examples (8.12a, b) could simply be accounts of two events that occurred in any of three possible sequences: car sale before tandem purchase, tandem purchase before car sale, or simultaneous sale of car and buying of the tandem, but they are likely to have the implicatures shown to the right of +>. The reason is that the assumption that utterers are orderly when they recount events invites listeners or readers to assume that if two events are presented in a particular order – without markers of sequence (like *before*, *first*, *then* and *after*) being used – then the utterance ordering directly reflects the order of the events. Encyclopedic knowledge – selling a car could raise the money for buying a tandem, or ownership of a tandem bicycle could help people realise that they do not need a car – is the basis for the further implicatures about consequence or causality.

The word *didn’t* in (8.12d) denies an implicated order. The possibility of denying the implicature testifies to the reality of that implicature.

Example (8.12c) shows that when the clauses linked by *and* appear to describe states (see Chapter 4), which have continuing existence rather than being located at points in time (see Chapter 6), then *and* conveys minimal linkage of two propositions, without implicating ordering or consequence. *Her name is Moira and his name is Jon* seems interchangeable with *His name is Jon and her name is Moira*. Exercise 5 at the end of the chapter is meant to help consolidate the points just made about (8.12d, e).

An advantage of having a two-component account of meaning (semantics plus pragmatics) has been illustrated with the analysis of *and*. Attempting to explain the meaning of *and* purely in terms of semantics would demand that *and* be recognised as three ways ambiguous, with the meanings ‘&’, ‘& then’ and ‘& consequently’. To account for which one of the three appears in a particular sentence, we would still probably need to invoke context and encyclopedic knowledge. With a promising theory of pragmatics, like Grice’s, the semantics can be kept simple: *and* just means ‘&’³ and interpretation in context yields the meaning overtones as implicatures.

8.1.3 Implicatures from relevance

Grice’s relevance maxim lays down that contributions should be relevant to the assumed current goals of the interlocutors (see 8.2). “What’s the date?” can reasonably be answered “Early nineteenth century” if the questioner is interested in something that you know to be a relic from Napoleonic times, but “Early twenty-first century” would be a joke response when your friend asks “What’s the date?” while filling in a form at the bank. How considerations of relevance can help make sense of a conversational turn is illustrated in (8.13).

(8.13) A: (Picking up a book from a display in a bookshop) “Have you read *Long Walk to Freedom*?”

B: “I find autobiographies fascinating.” +> ‘*Long Walk to Freedom* is an autobiography’
+> ‘Yes, I have read it’

A asked about *Long Walk to Freedom*. B talks about autobiographies. A asked whether B had read the book. B talks about what she finds fascinating. One might think that B had ignored the question, but the conversation can be read as co-operative and coherent by trying to work out how B’s contribution could be relevant to A’s question. If the book is an autobiography, then B has not switched topics. Asked about a book that you have read, it is customary to offer an evaluation. If *Long Walk to Freedom* is an autobiography then, by saying that she finds autobiographies

fascinating, B could be taken as evaluating it. And maybe her knowing that the book is autobiographical came from reading it. These guesses relevantly link B’s utterance to A’s question, so it is worth running with them. They are only implicatures, however, which means they could be wrong: B would not be speaking contradictorily if she extended her utterance to cancel one of the implicatures as follows “I find autobiographies fascinating, but I haven’t read that one yet.” It is even imaginable that, if B (mistakenly) thinks that *Long Walk to Freedom* is not an autobiography, she could say “I find autobiographies fascinating; so they are the only books I tend to read; I’m not into Chinese history.”

Relevance is regularly the basis for disambiguation at the pragmatic level of **explicature** (see Chapter 1). In an art gallery a *painter* is much more likely to be an artist than a person who applied colour to the walls and woodwork of the building, but it is the other way round when the current concern is home renovation. (In each case the context-based inference could be wrong, because the gallery itself has to have been painted and paintings can be hung in houses.) In Chapter 1, the example of contexts disambiguating *That was the last bus*, according to whether *last* meant either ‘final’ or ‘most recent’, depended on assuming that the sender of a text message and the driver of a bus would make their utterances relevant to their addressees’ concerns.

Relevance also explains the way “Thank you” can be used to cut short a turn from a caller phoning in to a radio programme. How – the caller is supposed to wonder – have thanks suddenly become relevant? Oh, the anchor person is acting as if I have had my say, because that would make thanks relevant. It then depends on whether the caller is compliant enough to take the hint or so hard-boiled as to ignore it. Frequently-used short cuts tend to become established paths, so this use of *Thank you* is now largely conventional.

8.1.4 General points about implicature

Do we need all four maxims? There appears to be some overlap among them. Utterances that invite consideration in terms of the high end of the quantity maxim, like the parking attendant’s response in (8.10), are also usually longer or contain more difficult words, which takes them into the ambit of the manner maxim.

In (8.12a, b) the ‘consequence’ implicatures connecting tandem purchase and car sale could be explained via the maxim of relevance. Contributions should be relevant at the point where they occur in conversations. Uttering the clause that comes before *and* in (8.12a, b) creates context for the clause that follows *and*. Addressees will expect the second

clause to be relevant to the first clause and will use their encyclopedic knowledge of the various motives for and merits of car and tandem owning to try to work out a connection.

It is reasonable to wonder whether relevance might not encompass the other maxims: what is false (quality failure) is probably irrelevant for understanding what is going on in communication; relevance might subsume the quantity maxim because too little information could be thought of as not enough to ensure relevance, and too much as cluttered with irrelevant extras; and we could regard utterances constructed in an unhelpful manner as at risk of not working because their relevance might not be grasped.

However, there is a difference in character between cases typically covered by Grice's relevance maxim and the others, especially in the contrast between relevance- and quantity-maxim implicatures which depend on scales, like the examples in (8.8). These latter are systematically calculable: a negative proposition is derived by backing up through the entailments that establish the scale: *We brought four mugs* entails (\Rightarrow) *We brought three mugs*, which entails *We brought two mugs*; so uttering "We brought 2 mugs" implicates ($+\Rightarrow$) 'We did not bring three or more mugs'. In comparison with this straightforward calculability, implicatures based on relevance make random demands on the addressee's ingenuity, as suggested by the formulations in (8.14).

- (8.14) (In a bank) "What's the date?" $+\Rightarrow$ 'The day of the month is what I am asking about?'
 (Talking about home renovation) "... painter" $+\Rightarrow$ '... person who applies protective and decorative paint coatings'
 (On a radio phone-in) "Thank you" $+\Rightarrow$ 'You should stop talking'

With recourse to encyclopedic knowledge, the hearer or reader has to come up with guesses that will make relevant sense of an utterance in its context.

Grice's system has been the inspiration for much other work, but the overlaps and differences mentioned above have encouraged theorists to attempt revision. Two different reworkings will be mentioned here, but not pursued because that would take us beyond introductory level. The name of Sperber and Wilson's "Relevance Theory" (1995) indicates their direction: they propose one scheme to cover all kinds of implicature. For them relevance is not a maxim; instead they explore the mental processes that go into maximising the useful information we get from utterances while minimising the interpretive effort that is put in. Horn (1984) and, more recently, Levinson (2000) have taken a different tack, concentrating on implicatures of the quantity and manner kind — ones that depend

more on semantic distinctions encoded in the language than on encyclopedic knowledge — and trying to specify in detail how they are calculated.

8.2 Presuppositions

Chapter 5 introduced **presuppositions**, the shared background assumptions that are taken for granted when we communicate. These are important in pragmatics because (as will be shown in Chapter 9) they are essential to the construction of connected discourse. Shared background presuppositions are also the obvious starting point for a reader or listener wondering what the author of a message might regard as relevant (see Section 8.1.3, above). People who know each other well can build up quite accurate impressions of what assumptions are shared between them, but it is harder to be aware of which aspects of that information the other person is thinking about at any point in a communicative interaction; and for communications between strangers it is even harder to know what is presupposed. **Presupposition** is also employed more specifically as the term for a particular kind of inference to be set out in this section. Inferences in this class are of interest here because they are an important way for speakers and writers to give hints, in the process of making each utterance, as to what assumptions they are currently taking for granted.

If, having missed out on the first distribution of dessert, you are asked "Would you like some more dessert?" you cannot really answer with a simple "Yes, please" or "No, thank you". The problem is that *more* indicates that the questioner presupposes you have already had some. Both answers would pick up and preserve part of the question: "Yes, please (I would like some more)" and "No, thank you (I would not like any more)". That means that *more* is still in there pointing to the same false presupposition that you have already had some dessert.

The pronoun gender distinction of English (*she-be, her-him, hers-his*) is presuppositional. This is illustrated in the exchange between A and B in (8.15). The presuppositions are on the right, following the symbol $+\langle$. (This symbol is meant to be easy to remember: the material on the left can be appropriately added to contexts in which the proposition to the right is true.)

- (8.15) A: "Where is the head of department's office? I want to speak to him." $+\langle$ 'The HoD is male'
 B: "She is female." $+\langle$ 'The HoD is female'

What is presupposed is background information. It is not asserted, so it does not count as the overtly presented information carried by an

utterance. B's response "She is female" carries the meaning 'female' twice, but the utterance is not unnecessarily repetitive. This is because the word *female* is the part that encodes the asserted gender information, whereas in the word *she* that same information is presupposed; it is merely the basis for the appropriate choice of a pronoun to refer to this particular head of department. (B could have merely said firmly "Her". This form of response approaches the problem in a different way, not by asserting the needed information, but by correctively offering a word that the enquirer should have used.)

8.2.1 *Presupposition distinguished from entailment*

A selection of further examples appears in (8.16–8.18).

- (8.16) Hana forgot to post the letter.
 Hana remembered
 (/ did not forget)
 to post the letter.
 Did Hana forget to
 post the letter?
 +< 'Hana was
supposed to post it'

- (8.17) Dick has begun to do a share
 of the chores.
 Dick hasn't begun to do
 a share of the chores.
 Has Dick begun to do
 a share of the chores?
 +< 'He didn't
previously do ...'

- (8.18) The medicine has cured her uncle.
 The medicine hasn't cured her uncle.
 Has the medicine cured her uncle?
 +< 'Her uncle was ill'

Being triggered by particular words in the examples (*forget, begin, cure*) and syntactic patterns (as will be illustrated later), presuppositions are akin to the encoded-in-the-language meanings that characterise semantics. But they are different too. (8.16–8.18) were written out as triples to highlight a distinguishing feature: **presuppositions** are not affected by negation of the asserted part of a sentence, and questioning the main drift of a sentence leaves the presuppositions intact too. Survival in this way is symptomatic of presuppositions being information that is assumed to be true. By way of contrast, (8.19) shows that entailments do not, in general, survive negation.

- (8.19) a. The medicine has cured her uncle. ⇒ 'Her uncle is well'
- b. ~~The medicine hasn't cured her uncle.~~ ⇒ ~~'Her uncle is well'~~

Scoring through indicates that there is no entailment in (8.19b). Presuppositions are different from entailments in another respect. They can be cancelled, as illustrated in (8.20), a fact that makes it clear that they are pragmatic. When this happens, communication is in danger of being derailed, and a warning to that effect is usually signalled by increased pitch on the stressed syllable of the presupposition trigger, for example on the *get*-syllable of *forget*, or the *mem*-syllable of *remember*. In the examples of (8.20) the extra height is shown by raising the v that marks the expected fall-rise contour.

- (8.20) Hana didn't for^vget to post the letter; she didn't even know it needed to go.
 Hana didn't re^vmember to post the letter; she didn't even know it needed to go.
 He hasn't be^vgun to do a share of the chores; he's been doing his share for years.
 'The medicine hasn't^v cured her uncle; he never was ill; you must be thinking of someone else.
 The medicine has^v cured her uncle; he was just pretending to be ill and when he heard what sort of medicine they were planning to give him he got up and declared himself well.

Being a presupposition trigger is not a rare quirk. There are plenty of them. Put *stopped doing* in place of *begun to do* in (8.17) and note that the presupposition is now that 'he previously did do ...' **Restitutive again**, employed in Chapter 4 in the tests for distinguishing verb-based situation types, triggers a presupposition about a state or activity having existed before. The quantifier *both* presupposes that there are just two entities being spoken about; and so on.

Factive predicates are a class of verbs – including *regret, matter, realise* and *explain* – and adjectives – like (*be*) *odd, sorry, aware* – that have been extensively studied as presupposition triggers (see Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1,004–11). These predicates introduce a clause that the speaker or writer, in normal communication, presumes to be true. A sample of factive predicates is given in (8.21–8.23).

- (8.21) It matters that they lied to us.
 It doesn't matter that they
 lied to us.
 Does it matter that they
 lied to us?
 +< 'They lied to us'

- (8.22) You should have explained that your train was late. } +< 'Your train was late'
 You didn't explain that your train was late. }
 Should you explain that your train was late? }
- (8.23) She's sorry that the Olympics are over. } +< 'The Olympics are over'
 She's not sorry that the Olympics are over. }
 Is she sorry that the Olympics are over? }

For comparison with the above, a non-factive predicate (*prove*) is shown in (8.24).

- (8.24) a. It proves that they lied to us. \Rightarrow 'They lied to us'
 b. ~~It doesn't prove that they lied to us.~~ \Rightarrow ~~'They lied to us'~~
 c. ~~It doesn't prove that they lied to us.~~ \nrightarrow ~~'They lied to us'~~
 d. ~~Does it prove that they lied to us?~~ \nrightarrow ~~'They lied to us'~~

With *proves*, the proposition 'They lied to us' is entailed in (8.24a), but – as expected for an entailment – the entailment falls away when the sentence is negated (8.24b). The inference on the right of (8.24a) does not count as a presupposition because it is not maintained under negation or questioning (8.24c, d).

There are syntactic constructions that trigger presuppositions too. Relative clauses,⁵ such as *that Admin sent us* in (8.25), exemplify this.

- (8.25) The email that Admin sent us } +< 'Admin sent us an email'
 said Thursday. }
 The email that Admin sent us }
 didn't say Thursday. }
 Did the email that Admin sent }
 us say Thursday? }

Time clauses with past reference, like *when we were in Monterey*, also trigger presuppositions. The sentence *I loved you when we were in Monterey* presupposes that 'We were in Monterey'. If one or more of the people referred to by means of *We* were never in Monterey, then this presupposition is not met and trying to use the sentence in that context is likely to lead to puzzlement: "What are you on about. I've never been to Monterey. Who did you go there with?"

8.2.2 The tell test

A presupposition triggered by a word or construction in a sentence is supposed to be background information assumed to be already known by the addressee, so it does not count as having been communicated. This was illustrated in (8.15) where the double occurrence of the meaning 'female', in "She is female", does not come across as pleonastic. The verb *tell* provides a test for presuppositions. Using *tell* to report gleaming information from someone when that information was presupposed is misleading. Some examples are given in (8.26), with initial query marks signalling that they are inappropriate ways of passing on information inferred as presuppositions. Their example numbers in earlier occurrences are noted on the right. A more acceptable way of retailing the information is shown as the third member of each triple.

- (8.26) A to B: ... Head of Department ... I want to speak to him. +<
 'The HoD is male' (8.15)
 ?B to C: A told me our Head of Department is male.
 better: B to C: A just assumed that our Head of Department would be male.
 A to B: Dick has begun to do a share of the chores. +< 'He didn't previously do a share of the chores' (8.17)
 ?B to C: A told me that Dick did not previously do a share of the chores.
 better: B to C: I gathered from what A said that Dick did not previously do a share of the chores.
 A to B: It matters that they lied to us. +< 'They lied to us' (8.21)
 ?B to C: A told me that they had lied to us.
 better: B to C: From the way A spoke it seems she believes that they lied to us.

Another example is shown in (8.27), based on *both* indicating a presupposition that two entities are being referred to.

- (8.27) Soldier about to pat someone down:
 "Put both your hands on the wall, up here." +< 'You have two hands'
 ?Pattee to someone else: "The soldier told me I had two hands."

In the next section presupposition will be seen to be part of the foundation for the acts that we perform when we use language.

8.3 Speech acts

J. R. Searle, in his elaboration of work by J. L. Austin, established *speech acts*⁶ as the term for what is going to be discussed in this section (see Searle 1975, 1979).

What is the point of talking, typing or writing to other people? Stating – passing on facts that will be news to our addressees – is indeed an important function of language, but it is not the only one. There are straightforward, almost non-technical ways of describing people's linguistic interactions: *She's giving the players a warning. They're greeting the visitors. I'm using this email to apply for an extension. That man is telling them what he saw. The letter confirms your appointment.* These basic units of linguistic interaction – such as give a warning to, greet, apply for, tell what, confirm an appointment – (the acts, not the labels) are called **speech acts**.

A sample of speech acts is listed in (8.28). Austin (1962), who founded the modern study of speech acts, reckoned that this sort of list could be extended to several hundred.

- (8.28) a. statement: "I lived in Edinburgh for five years."
 b. order: "Pay this bill immediately."
 c. question: "Where are you from?"
 d. prohibition: "No right turn"
 e. greeting: "Hello."
 f. invitation: "Help yourself."
 g. felicitation: "Happy New Year!"
 h. (grudging) apology: "I hereby apologise as required by the magistrate."

Speech acts can be done in writing, not only in speaking; the New Year wish in (8.28g), for instance, would be equally appropriate printed in a card or spoken. The utterances on the right in (8.28) are each based on single sentences. The sentence is the level of language that speech acts are tied to (Verschuereen 1999: 131), which means that an average ceremonial speech or political speech is not a speech act, but a sequence of speech acts.

8.3.1 Syntax and words that indicate speech act type

The speech acts in (8.28a–c) were put at the head of the list because they represent the default uses for three of the main patterns according to which English sentences are constructed (for an explanation of sentence types, see Miller 2002: 27–9). A declarative sentence construction, as in

(8.28a), is likely to be the vehicle for a **statement** unless factors in the context suggest otherwise (as when that example conveys an offer to locate Corstorphine, after people who do not know Edinburgh have expressed exasperation at not being able to find the hill and suburb of that name on a map of the city). **Orders** are the speech acts carried by utterances based on imperative sentences, as in (8.28b), unless context indicates that it is advice, from your best friend for instance. Interrogative constructions, like the one in (8.28c), have **questioning** as their central use, but context can lead to them being interpreted as other speech acts reminders, for instance "Have you confirmed your flight?", or requests "Could you hold the door open for a moment?"

When a sentence type is used in the performance of speech acts different from their default kind, we have what are called **indirect speech acts** (Verschuereen 1999: 25). An example of this is (8.29).

(8.29) "Could you put the lid on that one to your right?"

This was said to me while I was cooking, by someone working a couple of metres away, talking about another saucepan on the cooker I was working at. I said "OK" and put the lid on the pan to my right. The sentence type is interrogative, making a question the default speech act type, but it would have been uncooperative to take the utterance as simply a question, say "Yes, I could (my arm's long enough and I'm strong enough)" and do nothing more; so, of course, I treated it as a request. Searle (1975) showed how a general account can be given, in terms of implicature (Section 8.1), of the way this question came to be treated as an indirect request, as follows:

She appears to be asking whether I am capable of putting a lid on to a pan. It is so obvious that I could, that that surely can't be what she's wanting to know; so how could such a question be relevant? Well, if she's thinking of requesting that I cover the pan, then a precondition would be that I am capable of doing so; and her pretending that anything even a tiny bit inconvenient for me could count as incapacity would offer me a polite way out of acceding to such a request, or even a way in which she – if it seems that I might have grounds for refusing the request – could give up the idea of making the request. Yes, that would fit; so, why don't I short-circuit the process and, without even waiting for the request, treat the preliminary query as if it was a request and put the lid on the pan to my right?

That is certainly long-winded, but it is coherent and does explain why it is possible to respond to both the direct speech act and the indirect one: I could have said "Yes, I can, I'm not as busy I look; so OK, I'll do it." But,

perhaps through similar reasoning having been gone through by large numbers of English speakers, the form *Could you ...?* has become an idiomatic way of making a polite request, just as *Why not ...?* is an idiomatic way of making a suggestion.

Particular words can contribute to identifying the kind of speech act being performed: for example the word *promise* may figure in speech acts of promising and *sorry* may figure in apologies. They do not determine the kind of speech act because there are many ways of using words: “I promise to make you regret this” is a threat rather than a promise. We can ask people who say “We were sorry that we hurt his feelings” whether or not they apologised, because the quoted utterance could be just a description of the right frame of mind for a sincere apology, not necessarily an actual apology. It really does depend on context too. “I promise to be there” could count as a threat rather than a promise if the addressee would be intimidated by the speaker’s presence in the place referred to, and so on.

Language is the only general way of carrying out the kinds of acts illustrated in (8.28), though it must be admitted that some could be performed without language, as when (compared to 8.28d–f) a street sign indicates that right turns are prohibited, or someone smiles ‘hello’, or gestures a ‘help yourself’ invitation. The act is done in the actual transmission of the linguistic signal itself. When the addressee reads or hears (8.28h) in a real-life context, that is the apology happening. Notice how *hereby* in (8.28h) is deictic (see Chapter 1): the word *hereby* is used to point to the utterance itself as the apology. If someone writes to me “This is to wish you a happy New Year”, *this* is another example of discourse deixis, pointing to that particular written utterance itself as the felicitation.

8.3.2 Content and force in speech acts

Entailment, which is foundational in semantics, is defined in terms of truth: under conditions that make S1 true, S2 must be true (Chapter 1). Truth is vital for the speech acts known as statements, but can be peripheral to other speech acts. This is illustrated by (8.30 – 8.31), a real example. I fumed when I read (8.30) at the top of an electricity bill.

(8.30) PAY THIS BILL IMMEDIATELY

Issuing an uncompromising order like that only three days into the quarter seemed outrageous. The sentence *Pay this bill immediately* is an **imperative** construction and, as noted above, the default speech act borne by an imperative is an order. It was not an issue of truth that bothered me. I did not think “Liars!”. Then I looked at more of the bill and calmed down,

because what I had seen was only the first clause of an offer, given in full in (8.31), and an offer is a different speech act from an order.

(8.31) PAY THIS BILL IMMEDIATELY AND RECEIVE A £2.50 PROMPT PAYMENT DISCOUNT

Most speech acts have **content**: propositions carried by the speech act, presupposed by it or in some other way involved. In (8.30) the content is a proposition about the addressee settling a bill very soon; (8.31) has the same proposition and another one about the addressee getting a discount. I understood the shared proposition as being presented differently: in (8.30) as something I was being coerced into doing, but in (8.31) as a condition for me receiving a discount.

There is a cover term, **force**, for the characteristics that differentiate speech acts from one another. Force is mainly about the different ways the content propositions are involved in speech acts. All of the speech acts in (8.32) include the same content ‘someone won two gold medals’. I will abbreviate that proposition to ‘sw2gm’. Notice how it figures differently according to the force of a range of speech acts.

- (8.32) a. “Someone won two gold medals” – a statement expressing commitment to the truth of ‘sw2gm’ and doing so on the assumption that the addressee does not already know that ‘sw2gm’.
 b. “Who won two gold medals?” – a question presupposing ‘sw2gm’ and wanting to know the identity of the winner, to get a more explicit proposition.
 c. “Who won two gold medals?” – praise from the champion’s mother, presupposing ‘sw2gm’ and giving the champion a chance to relish thinking or saying “I did”.
 d. “Who won two gold medals?” – a boast from the champion, presupposing ‘sw2gm’ and ready to smirk as the audience realise they are in the presence of the someone who w2gm.
 e. “Be the one who wins two gold medals!” – an order from an athlete’s coach, demanding that the athlete make it true that she is the someone in ‘sw2gm’.

Schemes have been devised to group speech acts into a limited number of categories according to the main features of their force. Sorting the many different types of speech acts into categories raises the hope of discerning a system amid all the variety. Searle (see 1979) proposed a set of five categories. Two of them will be mentioned here to give an idea of the approach:

Expressives – for example thanking, condoling, congratulating and apologising – are used to express a psychological state (gratitude for thanks, sympathy for condolences, pleasure for congratulations, regret for apologies) about a presupposed proposition. The proposition concerns: something done by the addressee in the case of thanks and congratulations (to the advantage of the utterer for thanks, to the credit of the addressee for congratulations), a death in the case of condolences, a wrong deed by the speaker in the case of apologies.

Directives – for example ordering, demanding, requesting – convey a proposition about a future act of the addressee that the speaker desires, and the point is to try to get the addressee to commit to making the proposition true.

The pragmatic study of speech acts feeds back into semantics because, among the thousands of word meanings that need to be described in semantics, there are hundreds of speech act verbs (*thank, congratulate, tell, assert, ask, demand, excommunicate* and so on). A good understanding of the speech act characteristics of these verbs and how they differ (for example, that *assert* is a hyponym of (*to state*, meaning ‘state strongly’) is useful for describing their meanings.

That content (the propositional meaning focused on by semantics) is distinct from force (the distinctive ways in which content is involved in speech acts) can be seen from the fact that they can be separately negated, as shown in (8.33).

(8.33) I tell you the ball wasn't in; it was out. (negated content)
I'm not telling you the ball was in; I'm asking you whether it was.
(negated force)

As part of performing the sentence-level speech acts discussed in this section, senders have to do acts of **referring**. To refer, they have to judiciously use expressions like “they”, “your right”, “this bill” and “the ball” in relation to what can be seen, heard or safely presupposed in context, to pick out for their addressees the things, places, people, events, times, or whatever, that are being spoken or written about. Before the addressees understand what is being referred to in an utterance, they do not fully know what the content of that utterance is. Recall the three-stage account of utterance interpretation outlined in Chapter 1. Contextual disambiguation of ambiguous words (see Section 8.1.3, above) and the working out of reference is done at the stage of explicature, where propositional content is determined.

Summary

Pragmatics is about the use of utterances in context, about how we manage to convey more than is literally encoded by the semantics of sentences. The extra and different meanings inferable as conversational implicatures save production effort. Pragmatics builds on what is semantically encoded in the language. For instance the scale of modal verbs *must* > *should* > *may* allows a speaker who says “Fred may leave” to implicate that there is no obligation on Fred to leave. Presupposition is a pervasive feature of communication. There are words, like *again*, that act as presupposition triggers (this one signalling that the speaker or writer believes that the state or event referred to was instantiated before), and some syntactic constructions (for instance, relative clauses) act as presupposition triggers too. Notations were introduced for implicature (+>) and presupposition (+<). In Chapter 9 it will be seen that the coherence of discourse depends on us fitting our utterances to the presupposed background.

Also introduced in this chapter were speech acts: conventional acts that we perform with language – like telling, requesting, asking, greeting, advising, betting and challenging. Most speech acts have propositional content. The main differences between different speech acts concerns the way their content is involved: for instance, is it presented as an updating of presuppositions; as a desired change to the presupposed background; or as a presupposed proposition over which we are expressing regret, gratitude, or whatever? Indirect speech acts – as when “Tell me your name” is used not as an order but as a question – are ones that do not stick to the three main default correlations with sentence type (stating with declarative sentences, ordering with imperative sentences, and questioning with interrogative sentences). The forces of indirect speech acts can be understood as implicatures, though some become established as idioms.

Referring is a pragmatic act too, using noun phrases in context to let your addressee know which people, things, or whatever, you are communicating about.

Exercises

1. A: “Who’s that?” B: “It’s me.” In this exchange, B’s response could seem to be unhelpful. *Me* is a normal way for speakers to refer to themselves, so it appears not to tell A anything that is not obvious when someone is speaking from the other side of a door, or by telephone: “The one who is here speaking is the speaker of this utterance!” What is it that B probably

manages to communicate? Which of Grice's maxims is involved in interpreting the utterance? Explain how. Why would someone choose to talk like this, instead of saying, for example "My name is Yann Lumsden" or "I am your wife"?

2. What are the first three words doing in "The truth is: continued growth is unsustainable"? We are expected to speak truthfully anyway, so why use that claim to lead into a statement? Presumably the speaker is inviting serious attention by explicitly orienting to what pragmatic theorists know as Grice's quality maxim: 'Perhaps you think I sometimes bluff, I assure you that what I am about to say is true'. Which maxims are invoked by the following two different ways of making a similar emphatic statement about unsustainability? (The idea for this exercise comes from Grundy 2000: 79.)

Continued growth is unsustainable and that's all there is to it.
Let me make this clear, continued growth is unsustainable.

3. A: "Where are the sociolinguistics books kept?" B: "I don't know, but psycholinguistics is at that end of the shelf." B's utterance probably implicates 'Perhaps sociolinguistics books are there too'. Explain, with reference to Grice's maxims, how this implicature might arise.

4. According to a report in the *Guardian Weekly*, 10–16 December 2004, the Plain English Campaign's Foot in Mouth award for 2004 went to Boris Johnson's *I could not fail to disagree with you less*. Which of Grice's maxims did Johnson violate? Try to find a simpler way of expressing the same proposition? Speculate on why he phrased the remark in this way.

5. Example (8.12d) illustrated denial of an implicature about order. It might have been said in response to "I hear you bought a tandem and sold your car". Using (8.12d) as a model, attempt to construct for (8.12e) a parallel denial of an order implicature. Does it provide a convincing reason for believing that there is an implicature of order conveyed by (8.12e)?

6. If you hear someone say "It seeped into the basement" you can infer, amongst other things, that the stuff referred by means of "it" was a fluid substance (that is, a liquid or gas). You can also infer that, whatever it was, it entered the basement slowly. One of these inferences is a presupposition and the other is an entailment. Which is which? Give reasons for your answers.

7. Using the notions of speech acts and presupposition, give a brief description of the wording of this notice seen in a bus: "Thank you for not smoking. MAXIMUM FINE £100". (In the same frame there was a picture of a cigarette with a slash through it, inside a mandatory-prohibition red circle.)

8. For each of the following, name the kind of direct speech act that is the default for the sentence type noted in brackets, and say what indirect speech act the example would probably be used to perform.

- (interrogative:) Can't you stop talking?
- (imperative:) Help yourself to milk and sugar.
- (interrogative:) Have you heard: our team's leading 18 to 15?
- (declarative:) You have my sympathy.
- (imperative:) Don't imagine that entailment and implicature are the same thing.
- (imperative:) Accept my profound condolences.
- (interrogative:) Have I ever let you down?
- (declarative:) I recommend that you keep a copy of the letter.

9. A: "Do you like Brooke Shields?" B (after a puzzled pause): "What are they?" What is illustrated about the use of proper names by A's failed attempt (which I overheard) to refer to the actress Brooke Shields?

Recommendations for reading

Grundy's (2000) introductory pragmatics book is accessible and has lots of examples. Verschueren (1999) is a wide-ranging and interesting survey of pragmatic theory. An easy introduction to philosophical accounts of implicature, presupposition and speech acts is given by Lycan's (2000: chs 12 and 13). Chapter 11 of Kearns (2000) is a rigorous and detailed, but very readable, treatment of implicature. Saeed (2003: ch. 8) is a good account of speech acts. An excellent outline intonation and its pragmatic effects can be found in Roach (2000: ch. 15). The basics of Relevance Theory, mentioned in Section 8.1.4, are well explained by Blakemore (1992); see also Wilson and Sperber's (2004) handbook article.

Notes

- For original work by these authors, see Austin 1962, Searle 1979, and Grice 1989.
- Grice's manner maxim also said 'avoid ambiguity'. I believe that – except in punning mode and when carefully checking written material – language users

are generally not much aware of the multiple ambiguities in their output, and (as will be illustrated later) considerations of relevance generally enable addressees to work out which way to explicate ambiguous input.

3. Grice's label for this maxim was *relation*, but later writers have usually called it *relevance*.
4. A straightforward account of the meaning '&' can be given in terms of truth: a pair of clauses linked by & is true if each of the linked clauses is separately true, but false if one or the other or both of the separate clauses is false. Look under the heading *truth tables* in any book that introduces logical semantics, such as Kearns (2000).
5. Strictly, it is restrictive, or identifying, relative clauses that are presupposition triggers. See Huddleston and Pullum (2002) for details on relative clauses. There is some discussion of relative clauses in Miller (2002: ch. 6).
6. To be precise over terminology, I should be talking about **illocutionary acts** (IAs), one of about three general categories of speech act. However, because linguists have focused their speech act research almost exclusively on IAs, I will go along with other writers and use the label *speech act* as if it meant IA.

9 Connecting utterances to the background

Overview

Connected utterances make up a **discourse**, for instance a conversation is a discourse; a TV interview is a discourse; a letter that I write to a friend is a discourse; a whole book could be a discourse, to the extent that writer and reader keep track of the connections. This chapter concentrates on one aspect of the pragmatics of discourse: how our utterances are adapted to connect to the current interests and existing knowledge of addressees. The adaptations include **focal stress** (as in the contrast between "Meg's a SCOT" and "MEG's a Scot" – where the capitals indicate syllables pronounced with stronger stress); definiteness, often seen in the choice among determiners, for example *the* versus *a*; and distinct syntactic patterns (such as *It's Mary who is Scottish* and *Mary is Scottish*).

The chapter's aims are limited to making the matters mentioned in the paragraph above intelligible and – I trust – interesting. Discourse pragmatics is a wide field, so a selective approach is necessary.

It is communicatively counterproductive to enter a room where people are having a conversation and, taking no interest in what they are saying, blurt out whatever it is you want to tell them. The point of talking or writing is to try to update the presuppositions shared between sender and addressee(s), an idea introduced in Chapters 5 and 8. Rationally, someone hoping to do that needs to make assumptions about where the discourse is currently at and then shape any contribution so that it will fit the presupposed background. Assumptions about addressees' background knowledge and interests are based on: all humans sharing some things (the earth, sun and moon, capacity for pain and love, and so on); norms in a given culture (for instance, about what is edible); the fact that someone has opted into a discourse (as with me assuming that readers of this book are interested in meaning); any past experience with the addressees; and, very importantly, what has already been transacted in the current discourse (things recently said and written, by all

who have had chances to contribute to the discourse). What is presupposed is part of context. Remembering that pragmatics is the study of meaning in relation to context, the issues to be discussed here belong under the heading *pragmatics*.

9.1 Definiteness

Definiteness in noun phrases is a significant aspect of the grammar of English and will be used as a starting point here. If you are not already familiar with this notion, then the lists in Table 9.1 may be of some help. (Do not feel overwhelmed by the list; only the determiners *a* and *the* are going to be used much.)

Table 9.1 A selection of indefinite and definite forms

<i>indefinite</i>		<i>definite</i>	
<u>determiners</u>	<i>a, an, some, another, several, most, no, enough, any</i>	<u>proper names</u>	<i>Aberdeen, Zornoster</i>
absence of a determiner when head noun is plural	<i>—cities worth visiting</i>	<u>determiners</u>	<i>this, that, these, those, its, their, her, his, your, my, our</i>
<i>—famous people</i>		<u>personal pronouns</u>	<i>it, they, them, she, her, he, his, you, I, me, we, us</i>
<u>indefinite pronouns</u>	<i>something, someone, somebody, anything, anyone, anybody</i>		

The definite article *the* signals 'this reference is constrained: I am referring to something that you know about'. One class of example is (9.1), which might be spoken by someone phoning from the other side of town.

(9.1) Go and have a look outside, there's a weird green glow in the sky.

In a common way of thinking about it, the same sky is outside almost everywhere, so the phone caller can expect the receiver of the call to know about the sky; and that is what makes immediate definite reference appropriate. The sky is a topic. A **topic** 'is what the utterance is primarily about' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 236). As I will use the term, the topic is not the new information presented in an utterance – for example, it is not the weird green glow in (9.1). Instead, topics are

entities easily accessible in the presupposed background, like the sky. For a topic there should not be any need to run a preparatory check: "If I were to say *sky*, would you know which one I was talking about?"

A different and more common pattern can be seen in (9.2), excerpted from a recipe.¹ Intervening material has been omitted, but the sequence of these fragments is the same as in the original.

- (9.2) 675 g fresh green beans
 ½ l vegetable oil
 Trim the beans and cut them into ... 4-cm lengths.
 Heat the oil in a wok over a medium-high flame.
 Fry the beans ... until the skins just begin to crinkle ...
 Turn off the heat under the wok.

There is a tendency here – highlighted in (9.3) – for *the* to be used only from second reference onwards. (An exception to this generalisation will be discussed quite soon.)

- (9.3) *first reference* *subsequent reference*
 675 g fresh green beans the beans, them, the beans
 ½ l vegetable oil the oil
 a wok the wok
 a medium-high flame the heat

The first two lines of data in (9.3) illustrate a feature of recipes: the list of ingredients puts some things into the mind of the reader – makes them into topics – and after that definite reference is appropriate whenever the author wants to refer to the same items, which might by then already be gathered on a kitchen worktop. However, the next two lines of data show that an ingredients list is not the only way to establish a topic, to get something into the background knowledge of a discourse.

The expressions *a wok* and *the wok* refer to the same wok. The expression *the oil* refers to the same half litre of vegetable oil mentioned among the ingredients. The last line of (9.3) illustrates an important point about topics. They are entities in the knowledge base that an addressee consults and modifies in the course of understanding a discourse. The topics are not the words themselves. The expression *the beat* does not contain any of the words in *a medium-high flame*, but it constitutes a second reference to the same topic. It is not an actual instance of burning gas that is the topic here, because a recipe can be understood without starting work in a kitchen. On reading *the beat*, the definite article cues the reader to search through the developing mental representation of ideas relevant to this particular discourse, looking for something already in there that could be referred to by that expression.

The line *Fry the beans ... until the skins just begin to crinkle...* in (9.2), contains an exception to the generalisation illustrated in (9.3). This is the first reference in the recipe to any sort of skin, but it comes with *the* as its determiner, a signal to the reader 'you already know about these particular skins'. Bean skins are not ubiquitous like the sky. It is because prototype beans have skins – and the beans are, at this point, already a topic – that it is possible to treat the skins as a topic, part of the background for understanding the utterance. As noted in Chapter 3, the *bus*-relation is a basis for use of *the* for first reference to parts provided the relevant whole is already a topic. Thus we can talk about *the brakes* whenever vehicles belong to the shared background, because prototype vehicles have brakes. (Unicycles are non-prototypical and do not have brakes.) Perishable foods in supermarkets have sell-by dates; so someone asked to buy a carton of milk can be reminded in the same breath to check *the sell-by date*. In our prototype conception of an electrical appliance, it will have an instruction manual, which justifies saying *Why not look in the manual?* once the appliance acquires topic status, for example from someone saying *I can't make this thing work*.

The examples in (9.2–9.3) showed new referents being brought into a discourse by means of indefinite expressions like *a wok* and *675 g fresh green beans*. Indefinite marking (here: determiner *a* or – with a plural head noun *beans* – no determiner) is a signal to the addressee: 'I don't believe you have already got a referent for this one in the mental file you have opened for this discourse'. An indefinite reference invites the addressee to set up a representation for a referent, in other words to start treating it as a topic.

9.2 Clefts and passives

The syntactic patterns that are about to be discussed come in paraphrase sets (that is to say, sets of mutually entailing sentences, see Chapter 2), ones that, at the semantic level, have the same meaning. Yet they differ in their capacity for connecting with the presuppositional background. With definiteness, above, the issue was the addressee's awareness of referents, such as a particular wok. In this section and the following ones, propositional knowledge is also in play.

9.2.1 Pseudo-clefts

In June 2004 a hot rock fell out of the sky, went through the roof of a house in New Zealand and bounced off the sofa, leaving a big dent. Any of the sentences in (9.4) could accurately describe the rock hitting the sofa.

- (9.4) a. What hit the sofa was the meteorite.
 b. What the meteorite hit was the sofa.
 c. The meteorite hit the sofa.

(Use of *the* with both *meteorite* and *sofa* is deliberate, to make both of them topics here and keep definiteness out of the picture.) Each of the sentences in (9.4) entails each of the others; so all three are paraphrases of one another. Furthermore all of them have the same speech act potential (see Chapter 8) and, in the absence of special reasons to the contrary, they would most likely be used to make statements. Example (9.4c) shows the basic, unmarked, transitive (see Chapter 4) clause pattern of English. **Unmarked** means that it is a "default" pattern, the normal one. The sentence pattern in (9.4a, b) is called **pseudo-cleft** and has three distinguishing characteristics:

- a *wh*-clause with (in the technical sense of argument explained in Chapter 4) an unspecified argument (*what hit the sofa* is not explicit about the subject, and *what the meteorite hit* lacks detail regarding the object)
- a noun phrase that supplies the missing details for the unspecified argument in the *wh*-clause (*the meteorite* in 9.4a, *the sofa* in 9.4b)
- BE is the main verb (appearing as *was* in 9.4a, b).

The *wh*-clauses relate to presupposed propositions, ones that can be inferred from both an affirmative and a negative version of the pseudo-cleft sentence, as spelt out in (9.5). (Recall that \Rightarrow represents entailment and $+>$ stands for implicature. At (9.8–9.10) below, there is a discussion of the difference.)

- (9.5) a. What hit the sofa was the meteorite \Rightarrow Something hit the sofa
 a' What hit the sofa wasn't the meteorite $+>$ Something hit the sofa
 a'' "They say something hit the sofa." "Yes, what hit the sofa was the meteorite."
 a' ? "They say something hit the sofa." "Yes, what the meteorite hit was the sofa."
 b. What the meteorite hit was the sofa \Rightarrow The meteorite hit something
 b' What the meteorite hit wasn't the sofa $+>$ The meteorite hit something
 b'' "I heard that the meteorite hit something." "Yes, what the meteorite hit was the sofa."
 b' ? "I heard that the meteorite hit something." "Yes, what hit the sofa was the meteorite."

The double-primed exchanges (9.5a", b") are natural, even if the responses are a bit ponderous. This shows that the pseudo-clefts are appropriate when the information that the addressee already has ('They say ...' or 'I heard ...') matches the presuppositions (9.5a, a', b, b') associated with each pseudo-cleft. But, as seen in (9.5a', b'), these pseudo-clefts are inappropriate as responses in a background that does not fit with their presuppositions. (The query marks draw attention to the awkwardness of these as two-person mini-discourses. There is nothing problematic with the individual turns considered in isolation.)

In (9.5a, a') an affirmative sentence and the corresponding negative sentence both allow the same inference, which makes that inference a presupposition. Using the notation introduced in Chapter 8, *What hit the sofa was the meteorite* +< *Something hit the sofa*. The same is true of (9.5b, b'): the clause on the right *The meteorite hit something* is presupposed. And, where we get similar inferences later – in (9.8) and (9.12) – the clauses inferable from both an affirmative and the corresponding negative are presuppositions.

Thus the *wh*-clause of a pseudo-cleft identifies a presupposition, which should be old information, already known to the addressee. If it is not, then that particular sentence will not be a suitable one to use. The presuppositions are propositions with unspecified variables, *something* in (9.5a, a, b, b'). An appropriate pseudo-cleft – one that matches the presupposition – does two things: by means of its *wh*-clause it indicates the presupposition and it presents a noun phrase as the value of the variable (specific detail in place of the indefinite *something* in the present examples). This noun phrase carries the **new** information provided by the utterer of a pseudo-cleft.

The unmarked sentence in (9.4c) *The meteorite hit the sofa* could replace either of the pseudo-cleft sentences in the two-turn conversations (9.5a", b"). See (9.6a, b).

- (9.6) a. "They say something hit the sofa." "Yes, the Meteorite hit the sofa."
 b. "I heard that the meteorite hit something." "Yes, the meteorite hit the SOfa."
 c. "They say something hit the sofa." "Yes, the sofa was hit by the meteorite."

The responses in (9.6a, b) are very likely to exhibit stress differences – marked by the capitalised syllables *ME* and *SO*. These will be discussed in Section 9.3 on *Focal stress*. Passive sentences, such as the response in (9.6c), will be discussed later too.

9.2.2 It-clefts

- (9.7) a. It was her grandma who took Judy to the Potter film.
 b. It was Judy who her grandma took to the Potter film.
 c. It was the Potter film that her grandma took Judy to.

It-clefts highlight a noun phrase, often in order to contrast it with another. For instance, (9.7a) is an *it*-cleft when used to convey 'In spite of what you might think, the person who took Judy to the film was her grandmother, not her aunt'. (If you have been worrying whether *her* refers to Judy or to someone else, note that English simply does not make this clear; so it is not worth worrying about. I have been thinking of *her* as *Judy*, but it makes no difference to the structure and use of these *it*-clefts.)

It-clefts have similar distinguishing traits to the ones listed earlier for pseudo-clefts:

- a clause with an unspecified argument (*who took Judy to the Potter film* does not provide details about the subject, though *who* suggests a human subject, rather than, say, the no. 12 bus; *who her grandma took to the Potter film* does not specify the object; and *that her grandma took Judy to* has a gap after the preposition *to*)
- a noun phrase that specifies the missing argument (*her grandma, Judy* and *the Potter film* in, respectively (9.7a–c))
- BE is the main verb (*was* in (9.7))
- *It* is the grammatical subject.

As with pseudo-clefts, the clause with the unspecified variable is presupposed, which is to say that its truth can be inferred from the *it*-cleft in both its affirmative and negative form. The presuppositions are propositions but, again, to represent them in the form of sentences it is necessary to put an indefinite pronoun (*someone* or *something*) in place of the missing argument. See (9.8).

- (9.8) a. It was her grandma who took Judy to the Potter film
 ⇒ Someone took Judy to the Potter film
 a' It was not her grandma who took Judy to the Potter film
 +> Someone took Judy to the Potter film
 b. It was Judy who her grandma took to the Potter film
 ⇒ Her grandma took someone to the Potter film
 b' It was not Judy who her grandma took to the Potter film
 +> Her grandma took someone to the Potter film
 c. It was the Potter film that her grandma took Judy to
 ⇒ Her grandma took Judy to something
 c' It was not the Potter film that her grandma took Judy to
 +> Her grandma took Judy to something

The inferences in (9.8a, b, c) are entailments. Unless the sentence on the right is true, the entailing sentence on the left in each case cannot be true, as shown by the fact that (9.9a–c) are contradictions.

- (9.9) a. *It was her grandma who took Judy to the Potter film, but no-one took Judy there.
 b. *It was Judy who her grandma took to the Potter film, but her grandma took no-one there.
 c. *It was the Potter film that her grandma took Judy to, but her grandma didn't take her to anything.

However, the implicatures in (9.8a', b', c') are inferences which are normally available, but can be avoided in a pinch: (9.10a', b', c') are not contradictory.

- (9.10) a' It was not her grandma who took Judy to the Potter film; no-one took Judy there.
 b' It was not Judy who her grandma took to the Potter film; her grandma took no-one there.
 c' It was not the Potter film that her grandma took Judy to; Judy wasn't taken to anything.

Sentences like those in (9.10) are usable when someone is demonstrating substantial confusion over the facts – perhaps because of difficult handwriting, or noise or inattention in speech – during earlier steps in the discourse. In situations where reasonable communication is taking place, speakers and writers would use the *it*-clefts in (9.8) only when the corresponding presuppositions on the right hold true. For example, (9.8a) could be used to reply to “Who took Judy to the Potter film? Her aunt?” because the first of these questions also presupposes ‘Someone took Judy to the Potter film’.

9.2.3 Passives

- (9.11) a. The conspirators liked the scheme.
 b. The scheme was liked by the conspirators.
 c. (9.11a \Rightarrow 9.11b) & (9.11b \Rightarrow 9.11a)

Sentence (9.11b) is of a type called **passive**. Grammarians call the unmarked transitive type of clause (9.11a) **active**, when contrasting them with passive clauses (see Miller 2002: 26). A passive is longer than the corresponding active. This is because passives are marked by a greater number of grammatical morphemes (BE – showing up as *was* in (9.11b) – the preposition *by* and, for some verbs, a past participle form). By contrast

actives have fewer “markings”, which is a reason for calling them *unmarked*. Another difference is that the arguments (the conspirators and the scheme) that appear as grammatical subject and object are interchanged between active and passive. However, corresponding actives and passives are mutually entailing, as noted in 9.11c, which means that they are semantically equivalent, or paraphrases.

The existence of a construction that allows exchange between the subject and object positions plays a role in the meshing of new information with presupposed background information. There is a tendency – not an invariable rule – in English, and perhaps in all languages, for utterances to present old information ahead of new information (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1372). Intuitively this is reasonable: start with knowledge the addressee is presupposed to have, use a topic expression to indicate which bit of that knowledge you want to build on, then present the new information. Thus if the addressee is assumed already to know about the conspirators but not about the scheme, (9.11a) will be preferred, while (9.11b) might be chosen if the addressee is thought to know about the scheme but not about the conspirators.

Another tendency in English usage is one that favours the subject slot for references to animate beings, as in (9.11a) (see Biber et al. 1999: 378). Hearing or reading a relatively more marked form, the addressee should consider whether this may have been done for a reason, and such consideration – often largely unconscious – can, as indicated in Chapter 8, help in making sense of a communication. So, an addressee faced with (9.11b), a passive that furthermore goes against the animate-subject norm, should wonder what motivated the extra effort. Why was *the scheme* put in subject position? Perhaps to make it an obvious topic, a crucial link with the background to the discourse. And that might help the addressee find a recent memory representation of something that might have been spoken about as *a plot*.

It is worth asking what (9.11b) presents as new, given that *the conspirators* – with its definite article – might also refer to a topic. It could be the establishment of a link between two topics: ‘you’re interested in the scheme; you know about the conspirators; I’m telling you that the former was liked by the latter’.

In speech, (9.11b) would normally be uttered with one syllable more prominent than the others, and the location within the sentence of that stressed syllable influences what it presupposes. The typical position for this focal stress is near the end of a clause (see Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1372). The kind of presupposition relevant in this chapter is shown on the right in (9.12a, a'), when *conspirators* is the word containing the stressed syllable.

- (9.12) a. The scheme was liked by the conSPIrators ⇒ Someone liked the scheme.
 a' The scheme wasn't liked by the conSPIrators +> Someone liked the scheme.
 a'' "Who liked the scheme?" "The scheme was liked by the conSPIrators."
 a' ? "What did the conspirators like?" "The scheme was liked by the conSPIrators."

Think of *someone* in the presupposition of (9.12a, a') as not restricted to just one person, but encompassing 'some people' too. The questions in the last two lines of the example indicate that the questioner is presupposing in (9.12a'') that 'Someone liked the scheme' (which matches the presupposition of the passive stressed as shown), but in (9.12a') as presupposing 'The conspirators liked something'. With the stress on the indicated syllable (9.12a'') is a plausible question-and-response sequence, but (9.12a') is unnatural.

Thus one function of passives – the only one discussed here – is to put an argument into subject position, a basic slot for topics. A quick look will now be taken at another way of moving material into and out of topic and new information positions.

Chapter 2 introduced the sense relation of converseness that holds between some pairs of words. As a reminder, (9.13) illustrates a converse pair of verbs, *like* and *please*.

- (9.13) a. The conspirators liked the scheme.
 b. The scheme pleased the conspirators.
 c. (9.13a ⇒ 9.13b) & (9.13b ⇒ 9.13a)

Notice the overall similarity between (9.11) and (9.13): interchange of arguments when (a) is compared to (b), going along with differences in the verb (*liked* – *was liked by*, *liked* – *pleased*), while semantic equivalence is preserved (c). Actives and their corresponding passives are **syntactic converses**. The similarity between syntactic converseness, as in (9.11), and lexical converseness, as in (9.13), is further illustrated by the sentences in (9.14), which are all mutually entailing.

- (9.14) a. The conspirators liked the scheme.
 b. The scheme was liked by the conspirators.
 c. The scheme pleased the conspirators.
 d. The conspirators were pleased by the scheme. (or *at* or *with*)

There are not all that many pairs of converse verbs; so the alternative to the passive that *like* and *please* offer is not generally available.

In (9.15) some other sentence patterns are illustrated that facilitate the presentation of new information in relation to background by making it possible to move phrases around in sentences without affecting the semantics.

- (9.15) To the Potter film, her grandma took Judy.
 Judy, her grandma took to the Potter film.
 The Potter film, her grandma took Judy to it.
 Her grandma, she took Judy to the Potter film.
 Took her to the Potter film, Judy, did her grandma.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1366) list more such structures and provide labels for them.

9.3 Focal stress

The intonation of spoken English generally gives extra weight to one syllable in a stretch that often coincides with a clause. A syllable is a unit of pronunciation, but the kind of stress under discussion is associated with syntactic units, occurring in unmarked cases on the rightmost word of a phrase (Giegerich 1992: 252–4), usually a content word. **Focal stress**,² then, is syntactically-located intonational prominence doing semantic or pragmatic signalling work. There were glimpses in Chapter 7 of a semantic role for focal stress, in demarcating the scope of negation, modals and quantifiers. The present section gives a sketch of its use as a signal of new or contrastive information in pragmatics. (Each English word has its own stress profile, as seen in the difference between *conSPIrator*, *conspiraTOrial*. If a word is going to carry focal stress, then which syllable within the word will be the one that is stressed is determined at the word level. (There is an introduction to English word stress patterns in McMahon 2002: 119–23.)

An unremarkable two-turn conversation is given in (9.16), to show how focal stress marks new information.

- (9.16) A: "Did you come by BUS?" B: "I came by TRAIN."

A's focal stress indicates that the means of transport ('by bus') is the nub of the query: new information being offered for verification – B's arrival probably being what has made it alright to presuppose 'You came by some means'. The focal stress in the reply is used to say that a different kind of transport was used.

The display in (9.17), suggested to me by Swart and Hoop (2000: 123), presents a more complicated set of possibilities, to illustrate how focal stress ties in with syntax.

- (9.17) a. Could you [email] [her] [new BOSS?]]]
 b. No, but I could email her new SEcRetary.
 c. No, but I could email her uniVERsity.
 d. No, but I could email MEEna.
 e. No, but I could GO there.

The request in (9.17a) has focal stress on the last word. The different imaginable responses in (9.17b–e) show that what is taken as new could be just the referent of *boss*, as in (9.17b), or any of the different phrases that *boss* is the final word of. The square brackets in the first line make the point that these phrases are nested one inside another. The response in (9.17d), to take one example, treats the request as presenting the phrase *her new BOSS* as new information, signalled by having focal stress on its last word. And, if that is what is new, the presupposed residue is ‘you could email someone’, which makes *I could email MEEna* an appropriate response, one that takes what is presupposed and supplies an argument that fits in as object of the verb *to email*.

Compare (9.18) with (9.16). In (9.18a) the question’s focal stress is on *you*. Three different appropriate replies are given in (9.18b–d).

- (9.18) a. “Did YOU come by coach?”
 b. B: “I came by TRAIN.” (where both *I* and *TRAIN* have focal stress)
 c. B: “I came by TRAIN.”
 d. B: “LORna came by coach.”

The speaker and addressee are often automatically treated as part of the background (because it is difficult to have a conversation without them), in which case *I* and *you* do not carry focal stress. However, (9.18a) and (9.18b) are examples where they can carry stress naturally, to indicate contrast. The question (9.18a) presupposes ‘one or more came by coach’, but the focally stressed *you* in (9.18a) suggests an additional presupposition ‘you perhaps came by coach and I didn’t think you would’. The stressed *I* in (9.18b) conveys ‘I emphatically distinguish myself from the possibility you are apparently thinking of’ and the second focally stressed item in (9.18b) points to train travel as new information going against the questioner’s presupposition of coach travel as a possibility. (Yes, it can happen that there are two focally stressed items in one clause, though this is unusual.)

Example (9.18c) ignores the questioner’s apparent surprise at the possibility of the interlocutor having come by coach and simply provides information that contradicts the ‘you perhaps came by coach’ part of the presupposition. It is a neutral sort of response that lacks the crowing

overtones of (9.18b). Example (9.18d) does not directly answer the question. Focal stress on *Lorna* supplies an argument to substitute for the variable ‘one or more’ in the ‘one or more came by coach’ part of (9.18a)’s presuppositional background. The questioner has to infer, via the maxim of quantity (discussed in Chapter 8), that if the speaker of (9.18d) thinks it is enough of an answer, then *Lorna* must be the only mutual acquaintance who came by coach. So (9.18d) implicates that the speaker did not come by coach.

Summary

This chapter has been an introductory survey of structures and devices (definiteness, two kinds of cleft sentence, passives and focus) in English that indicate:

- what the communicator is presupposing about the background information against which the addressee interprets the utterance
- and which part of the message is presented as new.

There is more complexity to the subject than this introduction has suggested. The distinctions made in the chapter between background, topics within the background and new information are too coarse. For instance, a “reminder” like *There’s your future to think about* uses a structure (existential *There’s* ...) that is specialised for introducing new items of information – such as ‘a weird green glow’ in (9.1) – but *your future* is definite, which marks it as relating to known background information, and it is hard to imagine non-infant interlocutors who have never thought about their future. Probably at least two different kinds of background information need to be distinguished, depending on how recently or prominently they have figured in the discourse.

Also not discussed in the chapter are interactions between stress and construction type. If the grammatical subject position of a passive presents a topic (information assumed to be already known), how is a spoken passive interpreted when the subject carries focal stress, marking it as new? (The quick answer is that such passives are presuppositionally ambiguous.)

Chapter 7 had some examples that showed focal stress doing semantic work, implying that it can affect entailments, which would make focal stress different from what has been claimed in this chapter about passivisation and clefting having no semantic effect. The relevant cases usually involve the scope of operators (what is affected by negation, quantifiers and *only* etc.). Passivisation and *it*-clefts can show such effects too. See Rooth (1996) and Swart and Hoop (2000) for discussion.

Clearly, there is more to say on the matters covered in this book. I hope you will think on and read further about the ways in which language encodes semantic distinctions and how people put the semantics to work in the pragmatics of communication.

Exercises

- The only time I met the poet Hamish Henderson, it was unexpected and I asked "Are you THE Hamish Henderson?" His modest answer was that he was trying to stay in the top 100. Using the technical terms *definite* and *topic*, explain briefly what was going on in this exchange.
- Why is there no need for a preparatory introduction of topic before giving the following warnings: *Keep your head down* and *Mind the step*, where the underlined phrases are definite?
- Pseudo-clefts can be inverted, for example *The meteorite was what hit the sofa*. Compare this with the example discussed in the chapter *What hit the sofa was the meteorite*. Is the presupposition the same or different? (Hint: start by trying to find a proposition that is both entailed by *The meteorite was what hit the sofa* and implicated by *The meteorite wasn't what hit the sofa*. That is to say: find out what it presupposes.)
- Tom says that, as he remembers it, "It was the Atlas that Lucy borrowed". Tom is wrong. You are clear about who borrowed what: (a) Mary borrowed the atlas and (b) Lucy borrowed the dictionary. Indicate how to correct Tom by filling in the following to make a complete sentence:

"No, you're wrong: _____".

Which of the scenarios, (a) or (b), does your completion relate to? How does this fit with the presupposition pattern of *it*-clefts discussed in the chapter?

- According to the second half of (9.11c), *The scheme was liked by the conspirators* entails "The conspirators liked the scheme", but according to the first line of (9.12) *The scheme was liked by the conspirators* entails 'Someone liked the scheme'.

It is a fact that *The scheme was liked by the conspirators* also entails 'The conspirators liked the scheme'. Study these examples and the surrounding text and identify the reason why the less informative entailment 'someone ...' was cited in (9.12). Do not just say that it is because of stress

on the syllable *SPt*; that is a side issue in this exercise. Try, instead, to understand the logic of what was said about these examples.

- Example (9.18) had a question *Did YOU come by coach?* Amongst other things, it presupposes 'one or more came by coach'. What different presupposition is indicated by *Was it YOU who came by coach?* (a question based on an *it*-cleft)? There isn't an answer to look up in the chapter. Think about circumstances under which the *it*-cleft question would feel more appropriate.

Recommendations for reading

A comprehensive and readable account is given in Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) chapter on information packaging, ch. 16. If you would like to know more about theories in this area, then Swart and Hoop (2000) is an excellent and up-to-date survey. It is accessibly written but, even so, parts of it are quite hard. Rooth (1996) concentrates on focal stress. His article contains difficult technical material, but also lots of interesting examples.

Notes

- Madhur Jaffrey (1983), *Eastern Vegetarian Cooking*. London: Jonathan Cape, p. 18.
- I use the label *focal stress* simply because it makes it easier to remember that it is a kind of stress. In linguistics, the term *focus* is more common for the same thing: less common alternatives are *sentence stress* and *tonic*.