

Semantics and Pragmatic¹

1 Semantic Relations

Meaning seems to involve some form of ‘understanding’ and drawing INFERENCES seems to be a part of ‘understanding’.

We have the following scenario:

A: How many kids does Steve have?

B: Steve has two kids.

Now let’s look at the possible inferences we get from this answer (B).

- a. Steve has more than one kid.
- b. Steve has exactly two kids.

What is the main difference between these inferences?

1.1 Entailments

a. Leah painted a red cupboard.

b. Leah painted a cupboard.

(a) entails (b)

REMEMBER:

Entailments cannot be cancelled. What does it mean?

Leah painted a red cupboard and Leah did not paint a cupboard.

Reinforcing an entailment will give rise to redundancy.

Leah painted a red cupboard and Leah painted a cupboard. (Redundant)

Entailments have directions. If A entails B, it need not be the case that B also entails A.

Leah painted a cupboard, but Leah did not paint a red cupboard. (Not a contradiction)

However, mutual entailment: When an entailment pattern is bidirectional, i.e., A entails B and B entails A, then the propositions expressed by A and B are equivalent.

In short, we can understand whether a relation is an entailment:

When we negate the second sentence and reading them together is contradiction, then A entails B.

1.2 Implicatures

is an implicature of A iff B is ‘conveyed’ by A, but ‘not B’ is consistent with A.

a. Nobita ate some of the cookies.

b. Nobita did not eat all of the cookies.

¹The content is mostly taken from the course slides of Ling101 Fall 2021 instructed by Dr. Yağmur Sağ.

Implicatures are defeasible and reinforcing.

1.3 Some, all, none

1.4 Grice's Maxims of Conversation

H. P. Grice formulated the following conversational principles that guide conversational interactions of a speaker and an addressee.

MAXIM OF RELEVANCE: Be relevant to the situation at hand.

A: Can I borrow 10 dollars?

B: My wallet is on the table.

A reasons that B is being cooperative and providing an answer that is relevant to A's question.

MAXIM OF QUANTITY: Be informative.

Jamie answered some questions.

The hearer reasons that the speaker must be following the Maxim of Quantity. Therefore, their statement was as informative as possible without violating any other maxim.

MAXIM OF MANNER: Be brief and orderly; avoid ambiguity and obscurity. Natasha got a good job and got threw a party.

The hearer reasons that the speaker must be following the Maxim of Manner, so their utterance is 'orderly'.

MAXIM OF QUALITY: Be truthful.

A: I might win the lottery.

B: Yes, and pigs might fly.

B is flouting the Maxim of Quality to make an utterance whose likelihood is zero (since it's an untrue utterance) to deliberately make a comparison with A's utterance.

2 Some practice on Semantics

For each pair of sentences, state whether the second one is an entailment (E), a presupposition (P), an implicature (I) of the first. If there is no relation between the sentences, then say no relation (NR). Support your answer.

- Laura accidentally took a point off on Ethan's homework.
Ethan lost at least one point on his homework.
- Trajan is a couch potato.
Trajan is a potato.

- The pink car that he bought had an engine problem.
The engine problem is fixed now.
- It seems to me that Tagalog uses infixes.
Tagalog uses infixes.
- Kate always draws a smiley face on her own homework.
All of Kate's homeworks have a smiley face drawn on them.
- Sally asked Harry a question that he couldn't answer.
Sally asked Harry a difficult question.

3 Let's focus on pragmatics

In the following conversations, the underlined sentence is an implicature. Your task is to identify which maxim is followed or violated/flouted for the implicature to arise. If you think the Maxim of Manner is responsible for any of them, make sure to specify which Maxim of Manner is at play.

A: Does your grandmother have a neck tattoo?

B: She has a very traditional aesthetic sensibility.

(B's grandmother doesn't have a neck tattoo.)

Maxim:

All of the toys that my dog plays with are dirty and covered in saliva. The toys are dirty and covered in saliva as a results of the dog playing with them.

Maxim:

I ate three eggs when I ate breakfast today. I didn't eat more than three eggs.

Maxim: A: Did you make a doctor's appointment?

B: The phone line was busy.

(A didn't make a doctor's appointment.)

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Maxim:

A: Did you make a doctor's appointment?

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(A didn't make a doctor's appointment.)

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