

Pragmatics

- What is Pragmatics?
- Context and Why It's Important
- Speech Acts
 - Direct Speech Acts
 - Indirect Speech Acts
- How To Make Sense of Conversations
 - Cooperative Principle
 - Conversational Maxims

- to ask a *question*:

Maybe Sandy's reassuring you that Kim'll get home okay, even though she's walking home late at night.

Sandy: She's got more than lipstick and Kleenex in that purse of hers.

You: Kim's got a knife?

Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used and how language is integrated in *context*.

What is linguistic context? Why must we consider context?

(1) *Kim's got a knife*

Sentence (1) can be used to accomplish different things in different contexts:

- to make an *assertion*:
You're sitting on a beach, thinking about how to open a coconut, when someone observes "Kim's got a knife".
- to give a *warning*:
Kim's trying to bully you and Sandy into giving her your lunch money, and Sandy just turns around and starts to walk away. She doesn't see Kim bring out the butcher knife, and hears you yell behind her, "Kim's got a knife!"

Context

What exactly are the factors which are relevant for an account of how people use language?

We distinguish several types of **contextual information**:

1. **Physical context** – this encompasses what is physically present around the speakers/hearers at the time of communication. What objects are visible, where the communication is taking place, what is going on around, etc.

- (2) a. *I want **that** book.*
(accompanied by pointing)
- b. *Be **here** at 9:00 **tonight**.*
(place/time reference)

2. **Linguistic context** – what has been said before in the conversation. The “history” of things said so far.

- (3) a. *I can't believe you said that!*
b. *If my mom heard you talk like that, she'd wash your mouth out with soap!*

3. **Social context** – the social relationship of the people involved in communication.

- (4) a. # *Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home.*
(You can't talk like this to the President.)
b. # *I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavor to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs.*
(A bizarre sentence if said to a friend instead of “call me when you get home”.)

Note: # commonly used to mark a sentence that is inappropriate for a given context.

4. **Epistemic** – Knowledge and beliefs of the speaker/hearer.

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Sentence Types and their typical usage

Each of the three different **sentence types** has a typical usage:

1. **Declarative sentences** are typically used in **assertions**. They serve to convey information about what is true and what is false.

- (5) a. *The dog ate the bone.*
b. *John slept until 11 and missed his first two classes.*
c. *If I don't get this paper in by 5:00 I'll lose a letter grade.*

2. **Interrogative sentences** are typically used in **questions**. They serve to elicit (bring out) information from the hearer.

- (6) a. *Is it raining today?*
b. *Did you put the cat out?*
c. *How many times have you been to Cleveland?*

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Speech Acts

Whenever we use language to accomplish something we are performing a **speech act**.

There are many different types of speech acts, such as

- stating/asserting
- questioning
- ordering
- threatening
- confirming
- promising
- requesting
- advising

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3. **Imperative sentences** are typically used in **orders** and **requests**. They are meant to affect the behavior of the hearer.

- (7) a. *Go to the end of the line.*
b. *Don't even think of trying to cheat on this test.*
c. *Tell me what happened.*

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Performative Verbs

There is a special class of verbs which are special in that they name speech acts, and when they are uttered they **perform** the speech acts they name.

Thus they are a direct indication of the power of language to perform various tasks.

- (8) a. *I request that you stop that.*
b. *I order you to go to your room.*
c. *I bet you five dollars the Yankees win.*
d. *I fine you \$100 for possession of oregano.*
e. *I nominate Batman for mayor of Gotham City.*
f. *I promise to improve.*
g. *I pronounce you man and wife.*

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- We must have the following conditions to say that a verb is being used performatively:
 1. The speech act must be **between the speaker and the hearer**.
Speech acts involving non-present 3rd parties never occur. Thus if you use a performative verb with a non-first-person subject, then you are not performing the speech act that verb names.
 2. The speech act must occur **in the present**.
If you talk about a speech act you did or will do, then you are reporting that speech act, regardless if you use a performative verb to describe the speech act.

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Identifying Direct Speech Acts

How can we recognize direct speech acts when we see them?

- Sometimes the form of the sentence gives us a clue (recall discussion of *sentence types* above)
- While sometimes performative verbs will be present to help us identify the speech acts being performed, we must be careful not to be duped by them.

- (9) a. *I advised you well, didn't I?*
b. *He warns me not to drive drunk.*

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Identifying Direct Speech Acts - The Hereby Test

- Inserting **hereby** into a sentence with a potential performative verb will give you an indication of whether that verb is being used performatively.
 - (10) a. *I hereby request you to stop that.*
b. *I hereby order you to go to your room.*
c. # *I hereby advised you well, didn't I?*
d. # *He hereby warns me not to drive drunk.*
- Note that this is not foolproof – sometimes verbs might be being used performatively but inserting *hereby* makes them strange anyway.
- Another problem is that sometimes performative verbs are used performatively, but to perform speech acts other than the acts they name.
 - (11) a. *I promise to sue your pants off if you infringe on my patent.*
b. *I advise you to stay away from my girl/boyfriend.*

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Indirect Speech Acts

Indirect speech acts are characterized by the use of language to perform a speech act without actually using a form appropriate for that speech act.

While that might sound fairly mysterious, indirect speech acts are actually extremely common – we all use them dozens of times a day.

- (12) a. *Could you close the door?*
Please close the door.
- b. *There are wolves on the prowl tonight.*
I'm warning you to watch out for wolves.
- c. *I think it would be good if you sold that heap you call a car.*
I advise you to sell your car.

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Reading assignment to prepare for next class

- Section 8.3 of Language Files
- pages 138–157 of Ed Keenan and Elinor Ochs. 1979. *Becoming a Competent Speaker of Malagasy*. In: *Languages and Their Speakers*, edited by Timothy Shopen. Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers.

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How To Recognize Indirect Speech Acts

- Utterances cannot be indirect speech acts if they contain performative verbs in them, since then they would be direct speech acts.
- If there is no performative verb, then look if the sentence is one of the typical forms we have outlined (**declarative, interrogative, imperative**).
These may correspond to our normal direct acts – *asserting, questioning, requesting, ordering*. But they may also be indirect.
- Imagine the context in which the utterance would be used, and try to picture what the reactions of the hearers would be.
If they respond as they would for a certain kind of speech act, you can be pretty sure that the utterance is an indirect speech act of that kind.
So if the hearers simply acknowledge the utterance, it was an assertion; if they give some sort of answer, the utterance was probably a question.

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