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Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics

Department of Linguistics

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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CHAPTER 7

Pragmatics

FILE 7.0

What Is Pragmatics?

In Chapter 6, *semantics* was defined as the study of meaning. Given such a definition, it is tempting to suspect that once we understand the semantics of a language, we will automatically understand the meaning of any utterance in that language. In fact, however, identifying the semantic contribution of words and sentences gets us only partway to understanding what an utterance means. Why? The context in which a sentence is uttered may critically affect the meaning that the speaker intends!

Pragmatics is the study of the ways people use language in actual conversations. Pragmaticists study both how context helps to determine whether a particular utterance is appropriate or inappropriate and how changes to context alter sentences' meanings.

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FILE 7.1

Language in Context

7.1.1 The Importance of Context

We may often hear someone use a quotation—for example, in defense of a political opinion or a religious viewpoint—only to hear someone else counter, "But that's not really what they (the original speaker) meant! You've taken it completely out of context!" We also become frustrated when something we have said is taken out of context, feeling as though we have been misquoted. We know intrinsically that to ignore the original context of an utterance can misrepresent the speaker's intentions. Experiences like these tell us that context can affect an utterance's meaning. One of the jobs of pragmaticists is to investigate the relationship between context and meaning.

7.1.2 Sentences and Utterances

In order to investigate this relationship, we need a way to talk about language in context. Pragmaticists therefore distinguish between sentences and utterances. A sentence is a phrasal expression that expresses some (complete) idea. Consider a sentence like *There is a platypus in the bathtub.* We know many things about this sentence: it is a sentence of English; it contains seven words; it has a certain syntactic structure; and so on. However, while we are able to describe such properties of a sentence, sentences are abstract entities.

Whenever a sentence is used, though—whenever a person speaks (or signs) it—there has been an **utterance** of the sentence. An utterance is not an abstraction. It is an event, something that happens. Read the sentence *There is a platypus in the bathtub* out loud. Now, ask the next person you see to do the same thing. If you have followed these instructions, then you have just heard two utterances, but there is only one sentence. Likewise, if a theater company puts on a play and performs it ten times, the play will open with the same sentence each time, but there will be ten different utterances.

The distinction between sentences and utterances is so important that it gets marked typographically. Anytime that you see a group of words that look like a sentence and are set in italics, what is being referred to is the sentence: the abstract entity. If you see the same words in quotations, then there is a particular utterance that is being discussed.

Utterances may be described as having many of the same properties as sentences (e.g., language and length). However, utterances have other properties as well: we may talk about the time of an utterance, the place of an utterance, the volume of an utterance, the speaker of an utterance, and so on. It does not make sense to talk about the time or the place of a sentence, though, because a sentence is only an abstract idea; it is not an event, and therefore it does not have a **context.**

7.1.3 How Context Affects Meaning

There are many ways in which context can affect the meaning of an utterance. Consider a simple sentence such as (1) at the top of the next page.

(1) He is there now.

The above sentence, heard or read out of context, is difficult to interpret, because it includes many **deictic** or "placeholder" words that don't inherently refer to something specific. These words' meanings are always determined by the context in which they are uttered. We know that *he* refers to a male and that *there* refers to a place and that *now* refers to a time, but these vague meanings alone don't give us the precise information that we need to figure out what would be meant by this sentence when uttered in some context. Considering this sentence in isolation, we don't know whom we are talking about, where he is, or when he is there. Sentence (1) could mean that a friend of yours is in class, at the library, or in Europe; it could mean that Elvis Presley is in Las Vegas in the 1970s or that Santa Claus is at the North Pole on Christmas Eve. To determine which meaning was intended by the speaker, one would need to know when the sentence was uttered and what the speaker was talking about.

Deictic elements aren't the only reason that sentences are context dependent though. Any sentence can take on a particular, novel, and distinct meaning relative to a specific context. Consider the example in (2).

(2) Can you take the trash out?

This sentence seems fairly straightforward, but in fact it could have a range of different meanings. Suppose that your roommate is running late one morning and calls, "Can you take the trash out?" over their shoulder as they leave. They probably are requesting that you take the trash out. On the other hand, suppose that you have been in a crippling accident and that you are only just beginning to take on simple housework again. If your physical therapist asks you the question in (2), they are not making a request but rather inquiring about your ability to carry out a set of actions. Here's a third case: suppose that your younger sibling is pestering you while you are trying to have a conversation with a friend. Finally, in frustration, you turn to your sibling and say, "Don't you have anything else to do? Can you take the trash out?" Here you might not care whether your sibling takes the trash out at all. Rather, you just want to be left alone! Suppose, on the other hand, that in the same context, instead of saying (2) to your sibling, you have instead turned to your friend and, while pointing at your sibling, asked whether your friend can take the trash out. Now you are suggesting that your sibling **is** the trash, and you want your friend to carry your sibling out of the room! The same simple sentence can thus have at least four very different meanings. With a little creativity, you could come up with many more.

From both of these examples, it is plain to see that we cannot talk about what an utterance of a sentence means without knowing about the context in which it was uttered.

Some people may argue that there are certain default or "out-of-the-blue" interpretations for many sentences. Of course they are correct. For example, for most speakers, the default out-of-the-blue interpretation of (2) is that it is a request. What is important to recognize, however, is that out-of-the-blue is one particular kind of context that affects the meaning of an utterance as much as would any other kind of context.

7.1.4 Types of Context

An utterance's context can be broken up into several components. **Linguistic context** has to do with what preceded a particular utterance in a discourse. It refers to what others have said earlier in the conversation. So, for example, the answer "Yes" means something entirely different when it is an answer to "Do you like green beans?" than when it is an answer to "Is there a computer available in the computer lab?" or "Will you marry me?" The linguistic context of an utterance tells what speakers are talking about: green beans, a platypus, Santa Claus, or whatever. The linguistic context is made up of all of the sentences that have been uttered in a discourse leading up to the utterance in question.

A second aspect of context is **situational context.** Not surprisingly, an utterance's situational context gives information about the situation in which it is uttered. Situational context allows us to refer to things in the world around us even if they have not been mentioned before in the discourse. If a goat suddenly walked into your classroom, you could say, "It smells," and everyone there would know that you were talking about the goat. No one would wonder whether you meant the fish you had for dinner or your grandmother's perfume. This is true even though no one had mentioned the goat's presence already in the discourse. Likewise, if a friend tells you, "The governor was on TV last night," your friend most likely means the governor of Rhode Island if you are in Rhode Island, the governor of Ohio if you are in Ohio, the governor of Arizona if you are in Arizona, and so on. We apply our situational knowledge to what we hear all the time.

As a third example, a sentence such as *Rachael is very tall* has a different meaning if the Rachael in question is a preschooler, a ten-year-old, or a professional basketball player. In the first case, the speaker might mean that Rachael is three and a half feet tall; in the second or third case, the speaker could not possibly mean this. Why? Because people know that preschoolers tend to be around three feet tall but that basketball players tend to be much taller. Consider a situation in which you are describing your three-year-old niece. If you say to your sister, who has not seen your niece since she was an infant, "Rachael is very tall," your sister will know that you do not mean that Rachael is seven feet tall—or anything resembling that height! This information does not need to have been previously mentioned in the discourse in order for the speakers to use it to understand what others mean. (Refer to File 6.4 for more information about subsective adjectives like *tall.*)

Finally, **social context** includes information about the relationships between the people who are speaking and what their roles are. Social context is what makes it okay for your football coach to tell you to run two laps around the field but makes it unacceptable for you to tell your coach the same thing. Social context lets us know when saying "yes, ma'am" is a sign of respect and when it indicates sarcasm. We use social context to figure out whether the person who says to us "Can you take out the trash?" means 'You must do so right now' or whether they mean 'You don't have to, but I'd appreciate it if you did.' (For a more in-depth discussion of the way social context affects language use, refer to Files 10.1 and 11.1.)

Together, these three aspects of context—along with several others—provide critical information about what utterances mean.

7.1.5 Felicity: Appropriateness Relative to a Context

In addition to using context to figure out meaning, speakers also use context to figure out whether an utterance is appropriate in any given setting. Recall that when discussing syntax and other elements of grammar, we may refer to sentences as grammatical or ungrammatical. For example, in the sentences below, (3) is grammatical while (4) is ungrammatical.

(3) There is a platypus in the bathtub.
(4) *There is platypus a in bathtub the.

In the same way, when we discuss pragmatics, we refer to utterances as being **felicitous** or **infelicitous.** An utterance that is felicitous is one that is situationally appropriate, one that is appropriate relative to the context in which it is uttered. An utterance that is infelicitous is inappropriate in some way. For example, speaker B's answer in (5) is felicitous, but their responses in (6) and (7) are infelicitous. (Notice that a pound sign # is used to indicate infelicity, just as an asterisk is used to indicate ungrammaticality.)

(5) A: What do you do for a living?
B: I'm a linguistics professor at Ohio State.

(6) A: What do you do for a living?
B: #I have a job.

(7) A: What do you do for a living?
B: #My favorite color is purple, too!

Look more carefully at (6) and (7). What seems to be wrong with these two conversations? In (6), the person answering the question isn't providing enough detail. In (7), they don't seem to give an answer that is at all related to the question. There are many different reasons why it might be infelicitous to utter a particular sentence in a particular context; the examples above show only two of these reasons.

It is also important to recognize that an utterance may be called felicitous or infelicitous only relative to a particular context. It is very easy to think of contexts in which the infelicitous sentences in (6) and (7) could be uttered quite acceptably. They aren't felicitous, however, in the context given.[1] In other words, felicity is a property of utterances, not a property of sentences.

In general, the speakers of a language know intuitively whether an utterance is felicitous or infelicitous, just as they know intuitively whether a sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical. Also, as with grammaticality, judgments of felicity may differ from one speaker to another. Nonetheless, there are general guidelines that utterances must follow in order to be deemed felicitous.

The rest of Chapter 7 will be concerned with how to determine whether utterances are felicitous and with how context helps us to figure out the meaning of felicitous utterances.

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[1]In fact, one could imagine a context in which the entire exchange in (6) was felicitous relative to the rest of a discourse. Suppose, for example, that a thief is discussing their thievery with a business executive. The executive might remark that they think thievery is unethical. The thief could then respond that, in spite of the ethical side of things, "Stealing is an excellent way to make sure there's always enough money to go around. What do you do for a living?" At this, the executive could respond indignantly—and perfectly felicitously—"I have a job." However, supposing that a person were asked this question out of the blue, for example, by a seatmate on an airplane, then the answer would be under-informative. The point is that the more you know about the context of an utterance, the better able you are to determine whether it is felicitous.

FILE 7.2

Rules of Conversation

7.2.1 Rules for Conversation

Most social enterprises are governed by rules. A family may have a rule that determines who will set the table on any given night; traffic rules govern who may go first at a four-way stop; board games and sports have rules that outline which plays may be made at any point during the game. The use of language, like other forms of social behavior, is also governed by social rules. Some of these rules are designed to protect people's feelings by showing respect or politeness (e.g., rules governing whether you can use a first name in addressing someone or must use a title and last name). Even more essential are rules designed to protect the integrity of our communication: rules that allow our communication to work.

It is reasonably clear that if people were to decide to tell lies in some random way, so that listeners would have no way of determining when speakers were lying and when they were telling the truth, language would cease to be of much value to us. But there is more to it than that. There are various assumptions—e.g., about the honesty of our conversational partners and their intention to communicate information that is relevant to the speech context—that people bring to conversations. When agreed upon and followed by both speaker and hearer, these assumptions, which emerge naturally within societies, enable effective communication.

In an attempt to capture these facts, the philosopher H. P. Grice (1913–88) formulated the **Cooperative Principle**, which states that the basic assumption underlying conversation is the understanding that what one says is intended to contribute to the purposes of the conversation—that is, that people intend to be cooperative conversational partners. Obviously, what it means to be cooperative will differ depending on the particular context. In a business meeting, one is normally expected to keep one's remarks confined to the topic at hand unless it is changed in some approved way. But some close friends having a few beers at a bar would not be governed by the same sorts of strict expectations of appropriate conversational contributions.

Nevertheless, even in a casual context, the conversation will normally have one or more purposes, and each of the participants can be expected by the rest to behave in ways that further these purposes. Thus, even the most casual conversation is unlikely to consist of such random sentences as the following:

(1) Kim: How are you today?
Sandy: Oh, Harrisburg is the capital of Pennsylvania.
Kim: Really? I thought the weather would be warmer.
Sandy: Well, in my opinion, the soup could use a little more salt.

Grice argued that what prevents such meaningless discourse are what can be described as conversational **maxims**, which are principles guiding the conversational interactions of both speakers and hearers. Following these maxims is an important aspect of ensuring that our utterances are felicitous. In general, felicitous utterances are ones that conform to Grice's maxims.

7.2.2 Introducing Grice's Maxims

Grice divided his maxims into four categories, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the way that utterances are used in cooperative discourse. These categories are quality, relevance, quantity, and manner. Each category contains between one and four maxims. Note that while these are written as "rules" for the speaker to follow, they are broader than that: the speaker follows these in being cooperative, but it is just as important for discourse that the hearer assumes that the speaker is following them. A conversational partner who constantly assumes that the speaker is lying is just as uncooperative as a speaker who always lies.

a. The maxims of quality address our expectations of honesty in conversation. Obviously, effective communication is greatly hindered if the speaker randomly mixes lies with the truth or if the hearer assumes that anything the speaker says is likely to be a lie. However, it addresses more than just haphazard lying. There are two maxims of quality.

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The first maxim of quality is self-evident, as noted above. The second maxim is more interesting, because it is only when we believe we have adequate evidence for some

claim that we can have much confidence that we are not saying something false. That is, in order to follow the first maxim, we must also follow the second.

Nevertheless, people can differ strikingly in what they think is good evidence for their views. It is also the case that in different contexts, there are different requirements for how much or what kind of evidence will qualify as "adequate." For example, consider a claim like the one made in (2).

(2) The venom of the purple-toothed spider isn't strong enough to kill people.

If a biologist specializing in human reactions to venomous bites uttered this at a scientific conference, they would need to have met a certain standard of evidence before they could felicitously incorporate this utterance into their talk. They would need some knowledge of the kinds of chemicals in the venom and human reactions to them; they would also presumably have to know about the history of people who had suffered purple-toothed spider bites and how they had fared. On the other hand, consider a person—not a biologist—who had been bitten by a purple-toothed spider: as a result, they got a painful swelling at the location of the bite but were otherwise unaffected. In chatting with friends, they might legitimately be able to utter (2) without knowing anything more general about these spider bites; their evidence would be only their personal experience. Thus these two individuals speaking in different contexts have two distinct standards for quality of evidence. Of course, the second individual might be wrong: it might be the case that they were merely very lucky and didn't get very much venom in their body, but a worse bite (or perhaps a bite to a smaller or less healthy person) could cause death. Nonetheless, they have followed Grice's maxims by saying what they do not **believe** to be false and something for which they have adequate evidence based on the situation. If someone asked them, "Are you sure?" they might then consider explaining their evidence or weakening their claim: something like (3).

(3) Well, when I was bitten by a purple-toothed spider, I didn't die. So at least I know that the venom doesn't always kill people.

Meanwhile, the biologist could likely answer, "Yes, I'm sure," without further qualifications (though at a talk they would be expected to be able to produce evidence for their claim). Even though their levels of certainty differ, both of these speakers would have equal claim to utter (2) given the appropriate context and their stated experience.

b. The maxim of relevance (also called the maxim of relation) is often perceived as being the most obvious. It is also the most simply stated.

- Be relevant.

This maxim has a central role in maintaining the organization of conversation by preventing random topic shifts like those found in (1). To avoid such discourse, we are expected to make contributions that pertain to the subject of the conversation. If someone asks you about your plans for dinner, you should give an answer about that topic rather than telling a story about your trip to the zoo.

From the hearer's perspective, the maxim of relevance helps us to figure out what others mean by their utterances. Our default assumption is that the people we are talking with are cooperative and that they are doing their best to make the conversation work. This assumption allows us to make **inferences.** Consider the following conversation:

(4) Alana: Is Jamie dating anyone these days?
Sam: Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.

If she did not have these assumptions as a part of her linguistic competence, Alana could take Sam's response to be completely unhelpful. However, Alana will assume that Sam intends his contribution to be relevant, so she will likely draw the inference that Jamie is dating someone, in particular, someone who lives in Cleveland. (For a more detailed explanation of inference and implicature, refer to the discussion in File 7.3.)

As with the first maxim of quality, the maxim of relevance seems perfectly obvious, but that doesn't mean that people can't ever change topics. Imagine that two roommates have just arrived back in their dorm on a Friday afternoon; the following is an excerpt from their conversation:

(5) Rachel: We should think of something fun to do this weekend!
Sarah: Can we talk about something that happened to me in class instead? I want your advice about something.

In (5), Sarah uses the word *instead* to show Rachel that she knows she is supposed to stay on topic and be relevant by discussing weekend plans, but she has something else on her mind, and she asks for permission to go against that maxim. Of course, people don't always point out when they are about to say something irrelevant. We have all had

conversations in which we are trying to discuss some particular topic, only to have our conversational partner jump in with an unrelated fact or story. We may or may not be bothered—sometimes we do allow others to go off on tangents—but we are justified in objecting. Someone saying "Wait a minute! You're changing the subject!" acknowledges this jointly held assumption that utterances should be relevant.

c. The maxims of quantity concern how much information it is appropriate for a speaker to give in a discourse. Of course, there are some situations in which more information is needed and others in which less is needed. Notice how the two maxims of quantity are phrased in order to make allowances for these differences.

- Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The first of these maxims reflects the fact that we are expected to give all of the information necessary for a given circumstance and to make as strong a claim as is warranted (see the second maxim of quality). The second reflects the expectation that we neither provide too much information nor make a stronger claim than is warranted. Some examples will help to illustrate.

Suppose that you are asked what you are going to do over the weekend. If your German professor asks you in a language conversation drill, it will likely be acceptable to mention only one or two things that you intend to do (and it would be both infelicitous and rude to subject your class to a complete schedule of everything you plan to do). However, if a classmate is trying to schedule a meeting with you, they likely need to know specific times that you will be available. In this case, if you were to respond with the same short answer, it would be under-informative and therefore infelicitous.

Consider a second example. In this case, the degree of informativeness relates to specificity, or the "strength of the claim." Suppose that someone asks you where you grew up. One could imagine that any of the possible responses given in (6) could be true answers to the question (and thereby follow Grice's maxims of quality and relevance), but it is obvious that some of these answers would be appropriate in certain contexts and not in others. Each response could be too informative, not informative enough, or just right, depending on the circumstances. Try to think of an example of each kind of context.

(6) a. On the corner of Main Street and Minor Road
b. In Dayton
c. In Dayton, Ohio

d. In Dayton, Ohio, on the corner of Main Street and Minor Road
e. In Ohio
f. In the Midwest
g. In the United States

For more information about making claims with the appropriate strength and how the maxim of quantity is used to calculate certain implicatures, refer to File 7.3.

d. The maxims of manner differ critically from the other three sets of maxims. The maxims of quality, relevance, and quantity all have to do with the information that a speaker is expected to give or not give in a discourse. The maxims of manner, on the other hand, have nothing to do with the information itself; rather, these maxims have to do with expectations about how one goes about giving and interpreting that information in being a cooperative conversational partner.

- Avoid obscurity of expression. (That is, don't use words or phrases that are hard to understand.)
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief.
- Be orderly.

The first maxim, "Avoid obscurity of expression," indicates that speakers should avoid the use of **jargon** (terms restricted primarily to specialized areas of knowledge) or other terms that their listeners cannot reasonably be expected to know and that they should also avoid needlessly complex sentence structures.

The second maxim references the understanding that what we are saying should be clear within the particular context. Speakers should avoid saying things that have more than one meaning (e.g., *He promised to phone at noon*: what happened at noon—the promise or the phone call?) unless their listeners can be expected to know which meaning was intended. While there are many words and phrases that would be ambiguous out of context, the listener is expected to interpret the meaning based on the context. If Polly tells her friend that she's going to the bank to deposit a check and the friend claims to be confused as to whether a financial institution or a river bank is being referred to, it is the friend (the hearer), rather than Polly, who is not following this maxim.

The third maxim, "Be brief," tells us not to use a lot of words to convey some information when a few words will do. The expectation to be brief is different from the expectation to not give too much information. Notice that the speakers in both (7B) and

(8B) give exactly the same amount of information, but they do so in different words. Thus, the speaker in (8B) violates a maxim of manner by being wordy, but does not violate a maxim of quantity.

(7) A: What would you like to eat?
B: I'd like a cheeseburger, please.

(8) A: What would you like to eat?
B:#I'd like a grilled ground beef patty, served on a bun with a slice of cheese on top, please.

The fourth maxim, "Be orderly," comes down to the expectation that what we say should be organized in some intelligent way. So if you have information to convey about several different topics, you should convey all of the information on one topic first, followed by the next, rather than giving one sentence about each in alternation. Often speakers follow this maxim by giving general overview information first and then moving on to specifics. Telling a story in chronological order also is part of following this maxim. For example, consider the strangeness of (9) and (10). The first merely sounds peculiar, while the second is actually hard to follow.

(9) #Leslie read fifty pages and opened her book.

(10) #My mother didn't really want my room to be painted purple. I was worried that I wouldn't get good grades at the new school. When I was a child, my favorite color was purple. I worked very hard in all of my classes to get good grades. My mother told me that if I got good grades, I could paint my room. When I was ten years old, I switched to a new school. I wanted to paint my bedroom a bright color.

Neither (9) nor (10) could be considered felicitous in almost any context: they are so unorderly as to be almost nonsensical.

Thus, we find that although the four maxims of manner do not provide any insight into what information a speaker should share, they are critical with regard to how that information can be clearly understood.

7.2.3 Flouting Maxims

So far, for the most part, we have considered cases in which speakers follow Grice's maxims. Of course, people sometimes violate the maxims: at some point everyone has told a lie, changed the subject, given too much information, or said something confusing. Sometimes people violate the maxims on purpose (e.g., lying in order to intentionally deceive someone), and other times by accident. Strictly speaking, these violations are infelicitous.

But the maxims can also be exploited or flouted in order to communicate indirectly. A speaker **flouts** a maxim when they say something that in its most literal meaning appears to violate a maxim, but the listener is expected to understand the meaning being conveyed due to the shared understanding of the maxims. There are several reasons that one might choose to use the maxims in this way. We sometimes need to avoid saying something directly because doing so could hurt us or someone else. Grice gave an example of a professor who was asked to write a letter of recommendation for a recent PhD graduate who was applying for a teaching position. Suppose that the letter went like this:

(11)

Dear Colleague:

Mr. John J. Jones has asked me to write a letter on his behalf. Let me say that Mr. Jones is unfailingly polite, is neatly dressed at all times, and is always on time for his classes.

Sincerely yours,
Harry H. Homer

Do you think Mr. Jones would get the job? Probably not! In this case, the maxim of quantity is being flouted. Professor Homer wanted to convey his negative impression of the candidate without actually saying anything negative about him. The fact that he gives much less information than would normally be expected for this type of letter communicates this message clearly. The recipient of this letter will assume that Professor Homer is intending to be cooperative; the shortness of the letter indicates that he has said all of the relevant positive things he could think of—which is the essence of "damning with faint praise."

The other maxims can also be flouted. For example, if you and a classmate are discussing your professor, and you see your professor rapidly approaching, you may suddenly change the subject by looking pointedly at your classmate and saying, "Oh, really? I didn't know that chocolate originated in Mexico!" In this case, you probably don't want to change the subject to the history of chocolate; rather, you are hoping to

prevent your classmate from saying anything inappropriate! You expect that they will notice your abrupt change in subject and deduce that something is up. If they do, and stop talking about your professor, you have successfully flouted the maxim of relevance.

It is also possible to flout the maxim of quality. If someone says to you something that you don't believe, you may respond, "Right, and I'm the Queen of England." You don't mean that you are a monarch of the United Kingdom; rather, you mean something like 'What you just said is as obviously false as the idea that I'm the Queen of England.' A sarcastic comment such as this may sound harsh, but it may be perceived (in some contexts) as less hurtful than coming right out and saying, "You're wrong." Flouting the maxim of quality can also allow us to insult people and (usually) get away with it. If your friend is bragging about something mundane, you might say, "That's the most **amazing** thing I've ever heard—please tell me more!" In this case your friend will probably take it as an insult, but not one that they can legitimately take exception to (and utterances like this are often intended to gently poke fun in a friendly way rather than truly be insulting). This conversational inference arises out of the recognition that the insulter is flouting the first maxim of quality—the recognition that the claim is too strong (see the maxims of quantity) for it to likely be true.

The flouting of maxims often plays a particularly large role in humor, but it is an important part of everyday communication; it allows us to draw conclusions and can facilitate efficient communication, as we will discuss further in File 7.3. It is important to remember that when speakers and hearers flout maxims, their intention is to be cooperative conversational partners. But this cooperation requires a higher degree of effort on the part of both speaker and hearer, so it carries the risk of the intended message not getting through. Certainly each of you can think of a situation in which you meant an utterance to be sarcastic or a joke, or meant to imply something, and the person you were speaking to didn't "get it" for whatever reason; this can particularly be a risk when conversing with someone you don't know well, or a child, or someone from a different area or culture who does not share your specific expectations about communication.

7.2.4 Grice's Maxims in a Wider Context

The needs of social harmony, politeness, and linguistic integrity are not always consistent with each other. We have already seen several cases in which politeness keeps us from following pragmatic rules. Recall that we said at the outset that the rules for conversation are **social** rules (i.e., they are not a part of a language's grammar,

though they are part of speakers' communicative competence). As such, they are in competition with social rules that come from other aspects of a society, and sometimes, for one reason or another, they lose.

It is said that there are societies in which the failure to answer a stranger's question is considered very impolite and therefore people in this society will give a stranger a wrong or intentionally imprecise answer to a question rather than give no answer. From this we learn that Grice's maxims, being conventions, are very different from natural laws. While their essence may be universal across languages and cultures, the way that they are implemented and the way that they interact with other societal rules will obviously vary between societies.

FILE 7.3

Drawing Conclusions

7.3.1 Drawing Conclusions: Entailment

A crucial part of understanding utterances is being able to draw conclusions from those utterances about the way the world is. However, the conclusions we draw can be based on different kinds of evidence or reasoning. The sorts of reasoning that we use depend largely on the context of the utterance that we are interpreting.

One kind of reasoning commonly used to draw conclusions is based on the concept of **entailment,** which was introduced in File 6.3. For any two sentences X and Y, sentence X entails sentence Y if whenever X is true, Y must be true as well.[1] In the example in (1), the X sentence entails the Y sentence.

(1) X: Ian eats a large breakfast every day.
Y: Ian eats a large breakfast on Mondays.

Entailment indicates a commitment from the speaker's point of view. Entailment also does something for the hearer: from the hearer's point of view, entailment allows a conclusion to be drawn very confidently. If you hear and believe X, and X entails Y, then concluding Y is completely safe.

Entailment is a relationship based on literal meaning. Thus, entailments are conclusions that can be drawn irrespective of an utterance's context. But often, if you take only what is literally asserted and entailed by an utterance, that part of the meaning alone is not enough to account for hearers' understanding of the utterance. Speakers routinely intend to convey information in addition to what is entailed by the sentences they utter. Fortunately, hearers also routinely draw conclusions from the utterances they hear, even when the sentence uttered does not entail the conclusion drawn. That is, an utterance's context often helps us to draw conclusions—inferences—that were not entailed by the sentence that was spoken.

7.3.2 Drawing Conclusions: Inference, Implication, and Implicature

In File 7.2, we pointed out that people commonly draw inferences from what others say based on the assumption that speakers are adhering to the Cooperative Principle. It's time now to focus our attention on what is actually happening when a person draws such an inference.

First, consider a situation in which an inference is drawn that does not involve linguistic communication. A meeting between a supervisor and an employee is running longer than the allotted time. The employee doesn't want to say, "Our meeting is running longer than we'd scheduled," because the supervisor might find it rude. Instead, the employee may glance at their watch or phone. The employee is **implying** that the meeting is running long: sending the message without saying it directly. If the message is understood, the supervisor infers that the employee wishes the meeting to end. An **inference** is a conclusion that a person is reasonably entitled to draw based on a set of circumstances.[2]

A person may draw an inference in cases when no one has tried to imply anything at all. If you walk outside and notice that the pavement is wet, you might infer that it had been raining, but you wouldn't want to say that the pavement had implied anything. (There must be someone trying to communicate an idea in order to say that any implying has happened.) In the rest of this file, however, we will be considering only inferences drawn when there is a person trying to send a message, and more specifically, we will consider only cases in which—unlike those above—the message is sent using language. When a speaker implies something using language, we say that the utterance contains an **implicature.** Implicatures are conclusions that are drawn about what people mean based on what we know about how conversation works. There are many different kinds of implicature, and we will consider only a few of them here, namely, those that arise via one of Grice's maxims for cooperative conversation. You should be familiar with Grice's maxims (introduced in File 7.2) before continuing.

7.3.3 Implicature Based on the Maxim of Relevance

If given a suitable context, any maxim can be responsible for helping to generate an implicature. Consider the following sample of discourse between two strangers at a bus stop:

(2) Speaker 1: I'd really like a cup of coffee.

Speaker 2: There's a place around the corner called Joe's.

Here's a reasonable conclusion Y that we can draw from Speaker 2's utterance of X:

(3) X: There's a place around the corner called Joe's.
Y: Joe's sells coffee.

It is important to recognize that in (3), X does not entail Y: it is obviously possible for there to be a place around the corner called Joe's that doesn't sell coffee. Thus, the conclusion of Y is an inference: it is based on an implicature rather than an entailment.

How does the implicature arise? Speaker 1 is talking about coffee and looking for information about coffee. If Joe's were a bookstore that didn't serve coffee, then Speaker 2 would be changing the subject, which people usually don't do in the middle of a conversation. Speaker 1 is much more likely to assume that Speaker 2 is following Grice's maxim of relevance: if they want to interpret Speaker 2's contribution as relevant, they have to "read something into it" that Speaker 2's utterance didn't entail, namely, that Joe's sells coffee. In order to justify conclusion Y, we had to think about pragmatic concepts: people and conversation in context. We say that X **implicates** Y in this situation.

Recall this example from File 7.2:

(4) Alana: Is Jamie dating anyone these days?
Sam: Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.

The implicature from Sam's utterance (again based on the assumption that his contribution is relevant) is that Jamie is dating someone in Cleveland. Sam might instead have said *I believe she may be dating someone because she goes to Cleveland every weekend, and that's not her hometown, and she doesn't have a job there.* Given our set of maxims, though, Sam can say what he does and rely on the listener to figure out what he means without explicitly stating these other steps.

It is important to note that if Sam knew that Jamie went to Cleveland on the weekends to visit her grandmother, then his response would have been either very misleading (if he understood that his utterance had generated an implicature) or at least infelicitous (if he merely thought he was saying something unrelated to the topic at hand).

7.3.4 Implicature Based on the Maxim of Quantity

The conversation in (5) illustrates an implicature that might arise on the assumption that the speaker is obeying the first maxim of quantity: a speaker should give as much information as required.

(5) Mother: Have you done your homework for all of your classes yet?
Son: I've finished my history homework.

Let us again consider the actual content of what is uttered compared with the conclusion that is likely to be drawn, shown in (6X) and (6Y), respectively.

(6) X: I've finished my history homework.
Y: I have not finished my homework for my other classes.

Clearly, in this case X does not entail Y. It is very possible for a child to say truthfully that he has finished his history homework and to have also finished the work for his other classes. Rather, the mother is likely to infer Y because her question wasn't looking for information merely about the history homework but rather for information about work for all of her son's classes. She will assume that her son is giving as much of the information as possible that is required to give a complete answer to her question.

Numbers are a particularly common source for the generation of quantity implicatures. Consider the following discourse. What seems to be wrong with it?

(7) Gail: How far can you run without stopping?
Kim: Ten miles.
Gail: I guess you can't run a whole marathon without stopping, then.
Kim: Nonsense, I've done it a number of times.

Notice that what Kim says first must be true if what she says next is true. Certainly, if Kim can run over twenty-six miles without stopping, then she can run ten miles without stopping. However, Gail quite naturally assumed that Kim was obeying the first maxim of quantity with her answer of "ten miles"; Gail therefore inferred that Kim meant 'exactly ten miles, and no more.' If you pay attention, you are likely to be surprised by how often numbers such as 47 are used to implicate 'exactly 47' when the entailed meaning is 'at least 47.' These implicatures are so strong in English that people often view statements like Kim's as lies, even though what Kim says is technically true

(following the maxim of quality). The deceptiveness of this statement comes from her clear violation of the maxim of quantity.

7.3.5 Implicature Based on the Maxim of Manner

Recall that one of Grice's maxims of manner tells speakers to be orderly. Keeping this in mind, consider the two stories told in (8) and (9).

(8) Rebecca took the medication and had an allergic reaction.

(9) Rebecca had an allergic reaction and took the medication.

Both of these sentences provide exactly the same entailed meaning: there was an event of Rebecca taking medication and an event of Rebecca having an allergic reaction. However, someone who assumes that the speaker is being cooperative will assume that the speaker is telling the story in an orderly fashion. Thus, someone who hears (8) may infer that Rebecca had an allergic reaction to the medication, whereas someone who hears (9) is more likely to infer that Rebecca took the medication in order to counter her allergic reaction to something else.

Another one of the maxims of manner dictates that speakers be brief. Consider the following utterance:

(10) The man who lives with me is an electrician.

Upon hearing this sentence uttered by a person whom you don't know particularly well, you might infer that the speaker is talking about a house mate (or an apartment mate, or something similar). Of course, as far as entailment is concerned, the speaker could be talking about a husband, partner, son, or brother—all of which might explain their living together—but because "my husband" is shorter than "the man who lives with me," it is likely that the speaker would have used the shorter phrase, were it true.[3] Thus, by using the lengthier expression, the speaker implicates that they do not have one of these other more specific kinds of relationships to the electrician.

7.3.6 Implicature Based on the Maxim of Quality

The second maxim of quality tells us that we can felicitously say only that for which we have adequate evidence. In File 7.2, we pointed out that people often differ in what they

think is sufficient evidence for their views. Sometimes, we may draw inferences based on the assumption that we have the same standards for evidence as do our conversational partners. Consider the following conversation:

(11) Sandy: We need someone to make some sort of cake for the picnic.
Tom: I can make my family's favorite chocolate cake.

Sandy might draw the inference that Tom has made his family's favorite chocolate cake before, because the best evidence that Tom can make this cake would be that he had indeed made it, as spelled out in (12).

(12) X: I can make my family's favorite chocolate cake.
Y: I have succeeded in making this cake before.

However, this inference is not entailed by Tom's statement; it is only implicated. Tom could legitimately say that he could make the chocolate cake based on the fact that he had a recipe and had watched it being made many times and thought he knew all he needed to know to make it. Suppose Tom were to make the cake and it turned out very badly. Something like the following conversation might take place:

(13) Sandy: I thought you said you could make this cake!
Tom: Well, I thought I could.

As Sandy's challenge—which sounds quite felicitous—illustrates, she is justified in being upset that Tom did not have a high enough standard of evidence for saying that he could make the cake. Thus, the inference that she drew was well-founded. Was Tom justified in saying that he could make the cake in the first place? This question is one whose answer will be open to differences of opinion. The point, though, is that we ought to be aware that people may often infer a stronger claim than what has been entailed, based on their assumption about the sort of evidence that might be required in order to felicitously express some proposition.

7.3.7 The Significance of Implicatures to Communication

The system of implicature that has been described in this file is a kind of side effect of Grice's maxims, maxims whose primary purpose is to describe the principles that guide the conversational interactions of both speakers and hearers.

Implicatures are still very useful, however. They allow us to introduce ideas into a discourse with less commitment than we would have to express were we entailing the same propositions. In response to Alana's question about Jamie dating in (4) above, why would Sam choose to say, "Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend," instead of "Yes, she's dating someone in Cleveland," or something similar? Whatever his reason, it is clear that he wants Alana to draw her own conclusions. Maybe he only suspects, but isn't sure, that Jamie is dating someone in Cleveland and doesn't want to commit for that reason. Perhaps he wishes to be discreet and merely hint at Jamie's dating practices (so that she cannot later accuse him of revealing secrets about her). Implicature gives him a way to communicate the idea he has in mind while still protecting himself from committing to the truth of a proposition that he does not want to commit to.

On the other hand, implicature can serve a function much more fundamental to our conversations than merely protecting noncommittal speakers. One major reason for exploiting the maxims in this way is to make conversation easier. If we were forced to speak only in logically impeccable ways, making sure that what we said entailed every fact that we wanted our hearers to conclude, conversation would proceed at a very slow pace. That is assuming (counterfactually) that most of us have the logical capacity to do this. Communication would become very cumbersome if we could not rely on implicature. We use context and our knowledge about the universe to draw inferences from what we hear because it allows us to use language more effectively. It also allows us to use language more creatively than what would otherwise be possible, making conversations and everyday interactions much more interesting!

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[1]For simplicity's sake, here we discuss entailment as a relationship between sentences. However, it is really a relationship between what sentences assert, i.e., propositions, as explained in File 6.3.

[2]The words *imply* and *infer* are often used interchangeably in casual conversation. For the purposes of engaging in linguistic analysis, however, it is important to distinguish between these two actions. Implying is what is done by the person sending the message; inferring is what is done by the person receiving the message.

[3]Of course, the inference that the speaker is not related to the electrician could also be taken to arise from an implicature based on the maxim of quantity. Can you see why? It is important to recognize that the maxims work together with one another: thus we may infer the content of an implicature for more than one reason!

FILE 7.4

Speech Acts

7.4.1 An Introduction to Speech Acts

Just as people perform physical acts, such as hitting a baseball, and mental acts, such as imagining hitting a baseball, people also perform another kind of act simply by using language; these are called **speech acts.**

We use language to do an extraordinarily wide range of activities. We use it to convey information, request information, give orders, make requests, make threats, give warnings, make bets, give advice, offer apologies, tell jokes, pay compliments, etc., as the following sentences suggest:

(1) John Jones was at the office yesterday until 6 P.M.
(2) Who ate all the cookies?
(3) Sit down and be quiet.
(4) Please let me know if you'll be attending.
(5) If you do that again, I'll report you.
(6) Watch out—there's a huge pothole there.
(7) Five bucks says that the Buckeyes will beat the Wolverines this year.
(8) You ought to go to class at least once a week.

There can be little doubt that it is our ability to do things with language—to perform speech acts—that makes language useful to us. In fact, with language we can do things that would otherwise be impossible. Consider (7), a bet on the outcome of a football game. If we did not have language, how would this bet be made? We could imagine the speaker taking a five dollar bill and some pictures of football teams and pantomiming some action, but would this action have the force of an actual spoken bet? Probably not. How would the hearer know the specific details intended? In (6), we could warn someone of a pothole by pointing at it, but only if we were in a position to see it. How could we give the advice in (8) without words? It would certainly be difficult.

The following list contains some of the most common speech acts, which we will discuss in this file. Of course, language can be used for all sorts of purposes other than those listed, as well.

(9) Some common speech acts and their functions

Speech Act	***Function***
assertion	conveys information
question	elicits information
request	(more or less politely) elicits action or information
order	demands action
promise	commits the speaker to an action
threat	commits the speaker to an action that the hearer does not want

7.4.2 Felicity Conditions

In order to be felicitous, each of the kinds of speech acts listed in (9) must be uttered in a certain kind of context. As a rather silly example, consider how infelicitous it would be to request your garbage can to empty itself (assuming a typical garbage can in the early twenty- first century). For a request to be felicitous, it must be directed to a person (or animal or machine) that is capable of doing whatever action was requested. In fact, for any speech act, there is a set of conditions that must hold in order for that speech act to be felicitous. Fittingly, these conditions are called **felicity conditions.** Here are some examples of felicity conditions for two very common speech acts: requests and questions.

(10) Felicity conditions for requests
In order for a speaker to felicitously request a hearer to complete some action, it should be the case that . . .

a. The speaker believes that the action has not yet been done.
b. The speaker wants the action to be done (or thinks that the action should be done for some reason).
c. The speaker believes that the hearer is able to do the action.
d. The speaker believes that the hearer may be willing to do things of that sort for the speaker.

(11) Felicity conditions for questions

In order for a speaker to felicitously question a hearer about some state of affairs, it should be the case that . . .

a. The speaker does not know some piece of information about some state of affairs.
b. The speaker wants to know that information about the state of affairs.
c. The speaker believes that the hearer may be able to supply the information about the state of affairs that the speaker wants.

Look carefully at the case of requests in (10). The purpose of a request is to get a task accomplished. In light of that goal, these felicity conditions make sense. If any of these conditions were not met, then the goal could not be reached.

To understand when it is appropriate to make a request or to ask a question, then, we need to think about the felicity conditions associated with each of these speech acts. Clearly, the same holds true for other speech acts as well. In order for giving thanks to be felicitous, the thanker must (among other things) appreciate what the thankee has done; in order for an apology to be felicitous, the apologizer must (among other things) want the apologizee to believe that they are contrite; and so on.

When we introduced Grice's maxims in File 7.2, we said that utterances generally had to follow the maxims in order to be felicitous, but that there were exceptions (e.g., flouting). The same is true of felicity conditions: some of the felicity conditions for a speech act may be suspended in certain contexts. For example, in normal conversation we generally do not ask people questions that we already know the answers to, but there are exceptions: people playing trivia games, lawyers questioning witnesses, teachers giving exams. We recognize these situations to be socially exceptional in one way or another. Playing trivia violates (11b), because in trivia games people don't seriously want the information they seem to ask about; interrogating witnesses violates (11a), because a good lawyer tries to avoid surprises; and asking exam questions violates both (11a) and (11b), because the teacher does know the answers. Exam questions also possibly violate condition (11c) since the point of asking an exam question is to determine whether students can provide an answer. The fact is that we ask questions for a number of different purposes in different social contexts, and to reflect these differences, we can modify the particular felicity conditions. For trivia players we could eliminate felicity condition (11b); for lawyers we could eliminate condition (11a); for teachers we could eliminate all three. However, we have to be careful: for example, we wouldn't want to say that in the case of a teacher asking a question there were no felicity conditions at all; rather, there would be a modified set of felicity

conditions including perhaps such items as 'The speaker wants to know whether the hearer is able to supply an answer' and 'The speaker believes that the hearer should be able to supply the information if the hearer has properly prepared for the exam.'

It will be useful, as we go through the discussion of speech acts in this chapter, to think about them in terms of their felicity conditions. For each type of speech act, think about what the speaker must believe and desire in order for it to be felicitous to use that type of speech act.

7.4.3 Performative Verbs and Performative Speech Acts

Any time you open your mouth and utter a sentence, you perform a speech act. A special kind of speech act, known as a **performative speech act,** is one in which the particular action named by the verb is accomplished in the performance of the speech act itself. For example, someone can say "I am throwing a ball" without a ball actually being thrown (the throwing action is separate from an assertion about such an action), but someone cannot normally say "I promise to take you to the store later" without actually making such a promise. **Performative verbs** therefore denote purely linguistic actions. Compare (12)–(19) with (1)–(8).

(12) I assert that John Jones was at the office yesterday until 6 P.M.
(13) I ask again: Who ate all the cookies?
(14) I order you to sit down and be quiet.
(15) I request that you please let me know if you'll be attending.
(16) Yes, I'm threatening you: if you do that again, I'll report you.
(17) I'm warning you: there's a huge pothole you need to watch out for.
(18) I bet you five bucks that the Buckeyes will beat the Wolverines this year.
(19) I advise you to go to class at least once a week.

As these sentences illustrate, the speech acts performed by utterances of the sentences in (1)–(8) can also be performed by embedding these sentences as complements of verbs that state the speech act. In (14), for example, we have an order with the performative verb *order,* followed by a specific command.

Certain ceremonies or formal actions require the use of performative verbs, as in (20)–(22).

(20) I hereby pronounce you husband and wife.
(21) I christen this ship the *USS Language.*

(22) We declare the defendant not guilty.

These examples contain a very specialized group of performative verbs in that, by using one, a speaker not only performs a speech act but also changes something about the world: the legal relationship between two people, the name of a ship, and so on. (Note that when you perform other speech acts, such as giving an order, you do not effect some change on the world in the same way: the other person may or may not do what you have said, so ordering someone to sit down does not accomplish the sitting action. However, the world has been changed in that the person can no longer make a valid claim that they were not told to sit.) These specialized performative verbs often have additional felicity conditions associated with them having to do with the authority of the speaker. For example, if a dentist walked up to two patients in the waiting room and said, "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife," it would be infelicitous, because the dentist does not have the authority necessary to perform this speech act. Furthermore, the two dental patients would not be married as a result of the dentist's infelicitous pronouncement. When one of these specialized speech acts using a performative verb is used infelicitously, then not only is it infelicitous, but also there is no effect on the world (no marriage, christening, etc.). And like all speech acts, performatives must fulfill various other felicity conditions in order to be fully felicitous and effective, as seen with (23) and (24).

(23) I quit!
(24) I promise to drive you to work tomorrow if it rains.

If you yell (23) in a moment of frustration while alone in your office at work, or over a beer with a friend that evening, you would not be expected to clean out your desk and begin a new job search the next morning as you would be if you said it to your boss during a staff meeting. And if your best friend says (24) to you but does not pick you up during the downpour in the morning, you will consider that a broken promise, but the same will not be true if your six-year-old brother says it to you. Felicity conditions can also help us in the task of identifying particular types of speech acts, as we see further below.

7.4.4 Identifying Performative Speech Acts

Not all speech acts containing verbs that can be used performatively are performative speech acts. Consider the following sentences:

(25) I promise I will help you with your project this week.
(26) John promises he will help you with your project this week.
(27) I will promise to help you with your project this week.

Although all of these sentences use the verb *promise,* only (25) uses it as a performative verb. Sentence (26) is an assertion about someone else's promise, and (27) is an assertion about a future promise the speaker will make, so neither of these is a performative speech act. Why? There are two major requirements for performatives: (i) the subject of the sentence must be first person, *I* or *we,* since these speech acts concern the interaction between speakers and hearers; and (ii) the verb must be in the present tense, since performative speech acts, like all actions, take place in the present. Sentences (26) and (27) are therefore not promises because the subject of the sentence is third-person *John,* and the verb is in the future tense, respectively.

One test to see whether a verb is being used performatively is the *hereby* test. We take the word *hereby* and insert it before the potentially performative verb:

(28) I hereby promise I will help you with your project this week.
(29) #John hereby promises he will help you with your project this week.
(30) #I will hereby promise to help you with your project this week.

If the sentence sounds acceptable with *hereby,* then the verb is being used performatively. If the sentence sounds bad, then the verb is not being used performatively. (Sometimes this test is difficult to use because many such sentences sound awkward. This awkwardness may arise because people tend not to utter speech acts using performative verbs or because *hereby* may sound somewhat archaic.) Note, however, the naturalness of using *hereby* in (20) above.

7.4.5 Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

The types of speech acts that we have been considering, including both performative speech acts and the examples in (1)–(8), are called **direct speech acts,** because they perform their functions in a direct and literal manner. That is, the function that the sentence performs in a discourse is evident from its literal meaning. Perhaps the most interesting single fact about speech acts, though, is that we very commonly perform them indirectly, especially when we are trying to be polite (see File 11.4). So far, we have discussed direct speech acts that can be performed in two ways: (a) by making a direct, literal utterance, or (b) by using a performative verb that names the speech act. In

addition to these direct speech acts, we can use the felicity conditions to make **indirect speech acts.** Consider the speech acts *question* and *request* once again.

(31) Questions

A. Direct

a. Did John marry Helen?

b. I'm asking you whether John married Helen.

B. Indirect

a. I don't know if John married Helen. (cf. (11a))

b. I would like to know if John married Helen. (cf. (11b))

c. Do you know whether John married Helen? (cf. (11c))

(32) Requests

A. Direct

a. (Please) Take out the garbage.

b. I request that you take out the garbage.

B. Indirect

a. The garbage hasn't been taken out yet. (cf. (10a))

b. I would like for you to take out the garbage. (cf. (10b))

c. Could you take out the garbage? (cf. (10c))

d. Would you mind taking out the garbage? (cf. (10d))

There is something up-front about the (31A) questions and the (32A) requests. Sentence (31A.a) taken literally is a request for information about John's marrying Helen. The same is true of (31A.b). Notice, however, that (31B.a) taken literally would not be a question at all. It would be an assertion about the speaker's knowledge, or lack thereof. Sentence (31B.b) would also be an assertion if taken literally. Sentence (31B.c), in contrast, is a question, but a question that literally asks whether the hearer knows something.

As the notes given in connection with sentences (31B) and (32B) suggest, indirect speech acts enjoy a very close connection with the felicity conditions on speech acts. That is, we can perform an indirect speech act in many cases by appealing to a particular one of its felicity conditions. At the same time they are often, although not always, indicative of politeness considerations on behalf of the speaker. So instead of

assuming that felicity condition (10d) on requests holds, the speaker might ask if it does, as in *Would you mind taking me to work?* in order to make a polite request.

7.4.6 Identifying Indirect Speech Acts

In an indirect speech act, what the speaker actually means is different from what they **literally** say. There are several ways to determine whether an utterance is an indirect speech act. First check to see whether it is a performative speech act, since those are always direct. For example, *I'm asking you whether John married Helen* (31A.b) and *I request that you take out the garbage* (32A.b) both contain performative verbs, and therefore both perform direct speech acts. If the speech act is not performative, it might be indirect.

We can also check to see whether any felicity conditions are violated for the sentence's literal meaning but not for its intended meaning. If any are, then the sentence must be an indirect speech act. For example, if taken literally, *Could you take out the garbage?* (32B.c) would be a question asking whether the hearer is able to take out the garbage. For this to be a felicitous question, felicity conditions (11a) through (11c) must be satisfied: the speaker must not know whether the hearer is able to take out the garbage, must want to know, and must believe the speaker is able to supply the information. But in many situations (e.g., assuming the hearer is not disabled), (11a) is violated because the speaker clearly knows the answer to this question. On the other hand, for the intended meaning of the speaker requesting the hearer to take out the garbage, felicity conditions (10a) through (10d) are all satisfied: the speaker believes the garbage hasn't been taken out, wants it to be taken out, and believes the hearer is able and perhaps willing to do it. Therefore, this sentence is not a direct speech act of questioning, but an indirect speech act of making a request.

Finally, we can imagine a context in which the utterance is used and consider the way people normally respond to it. Different speech acts arouse different responses. Listeners respond to an assertion by a signal of acknowledgment, such as a nod or a verbal response like *Oh, I see.* People respond to a question by a confirmation or denial or by supplying the information being solicited. People respond to a request or command by either carrying out the action accordingly or refusing with some explanation. If the standard response to an utterance is different from what its literal meaning would arouse, then it is being used to perform an indirect speech act. For example, as noted above, the literal interpretation of *Could you take out the garbage?* (32B.c) would be a question. But compare it with something like *Could you lift 200*

pounds? You can respond with a simple *Yes, I could* or *No, I couldn't,* but it is not appropriate, felicitous, or polite to respond to (32B.c) with only this. Instead, people normally respond to such an utterance by actually carrying out the requested action—taking out the garbage, in this case. This shows that while *Could you lift 200 pounds?* is usually a direct speech act of questioning, (32B.c) is usually an indirect speech act of requesting: it has the same effect as *(Please) Take out the garbage* (32A.a).

7.4.7 Sentences and Their Relation to Speech Acts

We now turn our attention to the relationship between speech acts and sentences. Remember that speech acts are identified by the speakers' goals. Thus there are many different ways to perform the same speech act, because there are many different sentences that will accomplish the same goal. Not only do we have the choice between speaking directly (with or without performatives) or indirectly, but we can also choose a particular sentence type.

Certain speech acts are so common that many languages have particular **syntactic structures** (and/or morphological forms) conventionally used to mark them. Some examples of different types of sentence structures for English are given in (33), along with a basic notation of the order of subject (S), **verb** (V), and *object* (O) as a shorthand for their major syntactic characteristics.

(33)

Sentence Type	***Examples***
Declarative	Andre **is cooking** *the chicken.*
Interrogative	**Is** Andre **cooking** *the chicken?*
	Who **is cooking** *the chicken? What* **is** Andre **cooking**?
Imperative	**Cook** *the chicken.*

On the surface, it looks as though declarative sentences, which in English usually follow the basic word order of SV(O), are perfect for making assertions. Interrogative sentences, which usually have a verb form and/or a *wh-* word like *who* or *what* at the beginning of the sentence, are designed for asking questions; and imperative sentences, which usually lack a subject (sometimes referred to as "understood *you*"), are made for giving orders. This association is fairly typical and often holds. But don't confuse the **sentence types** (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) with **speech acts** (assertion, question, and request)! They are different, and this association does not always hold.

As with all things related to pragmatics, the key is context. Consider the sentences in table (34). All of these, in an out-of-the-blue context, might be interpreted as serving the function indicated in the table (depending on prosody or other factors). (Note also that in each column, the third declarative sentence is a direct performative speech act.)

(34) Ways to use different sentence forms to complete various speech acts

	Type of Speech Act		
Type of Sentence	**Assertion**	**Question**	**Order/Request**
Declarative	• Columbus is the capital of Ohio. • I'm telling you that Columbus is the capital of Ohio. • I hereby assert that the capital of Ohio is Columbus.	• I would like to know what the capital of Ohio is. • I've been wondering about which city is the capital of Ohio. • I ask you what the capital of Ohio is.	• It would make me very happy if you would take out the garbage. • I need you to take out the garbage. • I order you to take out the garbage.
Interrogative	• Did you know that Columbus is the capital of Ohio? • May I inform you that Columbus is the capital of Ohio?	• What is the capital of Ohio? • Can you tell me what the capital of Ohio is?	• Will you take out the garbage? • Would you mind terribly if I asked you to take out the garbage?
Imperative	• Remember that Columbus is the capital of Ohio. • Let me tell you that Columbus is the capital of Ohio.	• Tell me what the capital of Ohio is. • Let me ask you what the capital of Ohio is.	• Take out the garbage. • Don't forget to take out the garbage. • Allow me to request that you take out the garbage.

Long Description

The sentences in table (34) show that any of the three sentence types can be used to perform any of these three speech acts. It is often the case that when declarative sentences are used to make assertions, or interrogative sentences are used to ask questions, or imperative sentences are used to give orders, the resulting sentences are direct speech acts, while other pairings between form and speech act yield indirect speech acts. This generalization does not always hold, however. Note that often within one square of the grid are both a direct and an indirect speech act of the same type that use the same sentence structure. For example, *Columbus is the capital of Ohio* is asserting something directly about Ohio, but *I'm telling you that Columbus is the capital of Ohio* is literally asserting something about what the speaker is saying and only indirectly asserting something about Ohio. Likewise, *Take out the garbage* is a direct request, whereas *Allow me to request that you take out the garbage* literally is a request that the speaker be permitted to make another request! It only indirectly asks the hearer to take out the garbage.

Regardless of how we perform our speech acts, though—directly or indirectly, and using whichever syntax and words that we choose—the take-home message is that there is much that we accomplish by using language.

FILE 7.5

Presupposition

7.5.1 Presuppositions of Existence

(1) The Amazon River runs through northern Europe.

Presumably most of you responded to this sentence by thinking something like, "No it doesn't! The Amazon River is in South America!" But it is likely that none of you responded by thinking, "There's no such thing as the Amazon River," or wondering whether there's a place called Europe. If you were talking with someone who asserted (1), you would do very well to disagree with them, but you would be disagreeing about the location of the Amazon River, not its existence. Compare your reaction to (1) with the sort of reaction you might have to (2).

(2) The Bvryzax River runs through northern Europe.

Could you respond to (2) by saying, "No it doesn't!" Indeed, you could not. Why? Because (at least at the time of this publication) there is no river anywhere in the known universe by the name of Bvryzax. In order to say of a river that it does not run through northern Europe, you must believe that the river exists. If you wanted—very rightly—to object to someone's uttering (2), you would have to say something more along the lines of "There's no such thing as the Bvryzax River." Similarly, if a little girl tells you that the monster under her bed has fangs, you would likely not want to say, "No, it doesn't." Responding in that way would merely corroborate the existence of the (perhaps fanged) monster. Rather, you would want to dispute the underlying assumption that a monster existed at all.

Both (1) and (2) would be infelicitous in almost any context that you can think of —other than perhaps a work of fiction—but for different reasons. An utterance of (1) would be infelicitous because of a violation of Grice's maxim of quality. An utterance of (2) would be infelicitous because it **presupposes** the existence of something that does not exist. A **presupposition** is an underlying assumption that must be satisfied in order for

an utterance to make sense or for it to be debatable. Presuppositions appear exceedingly often in the sentences that we hear uttered every day, and most of the time we don't notice their presence at all. However, when they are not satisfied, we are often left not knowing quite how to respond.

What does it mean for a presupposition to be **satisfied**? It means that the participants in the discourse must believe that the presupposed information is true (or at least that they behave as though they believe it) before the sentence containing the presupposition is uttered. Presuppositions can be satisfied either when the information they contain is considered common knowledge—for example, that there is such a river as the Amazon—or when they contain information that has previously been asserted in the discourse. Either way, the speaker can reasonably assume that all of the participants are aware of it. If a sentence containing a presupposition is uttered in a context where the presupposition is not satisfied, most of the time that utterance is infelicitous.

For example, the claim "The monster under my bed has fangs" presupposes that there is a monster under the speaker's bed. If the presupposition is not satisfied (because not all of the participants believe it is true), then there is something odd about the utterance: if no such monster exists, then it can neither have fangs nor not have fangs, and if the participants don't believe the monster exists, they can't felicitously discuss whether or not it has fangs. The new information being presented—the information about fangs—doesn't make sense until after the presupposition of the monster's existence has been dealt with.

One of the most common kinds of presupposition is the variety discussed so far: these are **existence presuppositions**. Whenever someone utters a sentence about a specific thing or person, then the speaker presupposes that that thing or person exists in order to be able to say something about it. (We may sometimes utter sentences that are about things we know don't exist, such as Santa Claus, but we have agreed as a society to continue to behave much of the time as though he did, and this allows us to felicitously make claims about his red suit, reindeer, etc.) To consider another case in which an existence presupposition has not been satisfied, imagine the following discourse between two co-workers who do not know each other very well yet:

(3) Jan: #I'm sorry that I was late to our meeting; I had to take my pet giraffe to the veterinarian.

Caleb: Wait a minute! You have a pet giraffe?

Caleb is right to object to Jan's excuse for being late. Having a pet giraffe is not very common or likely, so Jan should not have assumed she could discuss the giraffe in passing without first establishing that it existed. But Caleb is also put in a difficult situation, because he cannot simply disagree. If he retorts, "No, you didn't have to take your giraffe to the vet," then he has done exactly what he did not want to do, which is to affirm the giraffe's existence. Instead, all he can do is sputter and say, "Wait a minute!" Such is the nature of what infelicity does to conversation. The conversation would have gone much better had Jan said (4) instead.

(4) I'm sorry that I was late to our meeting. I have a pet giraffe, and it hasn't been feeling well, so I had to take it to the veterinarian.

In this case, Caleb might believe Jan is lying, but at least Jan has done her job to establish the existence of her giraffe before beginning to talk about it. Now there is a specific part of Jan's utterance ("I have a pet giraffe") that Caleb can refute.

7.5.2 Presuppositions and Truth Values

We mentioned above that one of the problems that can arise with sentences containing unsatisfied presuppositions is that we don't seem to be able to tell whether they are true or false; that is, we cannot determine their truth value (see Section 6.3.1). Contrast this with the sentences in (5), which presuppose that there is such a place as Disneyland.

(5) a. Yesterday, Disneyland had more than 3,000 visitors.
b. Yesterday, Disneyland did not have more than 3,000 visitors.

Because it is common knowledge that there is such a place as Disneyland, it is almost certain that you acknowledged its existence prior to reading (5a). Thus the presupposition was satisfied, and we can move on to answer another question: is (5a) true or false? It is probable that you do not know. (Of course, whether it is true or false will depend largely on which day is denoted by the deictic word *yesterday.*) Whichever day we are talking about, though, either Disneyland did have more than 3,000 visitors, or else it did not. That is, either (5a) is true, or else (5b) is. It is not possible for both (5a) and (5b) to be false.

Now, let's consider the Bvryzax River again. Of course, we see immediately that the sentences in (6) contain an unsatisfied presupposition: there is no such river as the Bvryzax.

(6) a. #The Bvryzax River reaches a depth of 25 meters.
b. #The Bvryzax River does not reach a depth of 25 meters.

Is (6a) true? No, it is not. Well, then, following the pattern we saw in (5), if (6a) is not true, then (6b) must be true, right? Well, no; that doesn't seem correct either. Under ordinary circumstances, if you negate a true sentence, then you are left with a false sentence, and if you negate a false sentence, then you are left with a true sentence. In the case of sentences with unsatisfied presuppositions, though, this generalization seems to fall through.

This gives us one way of identifying an unsatisfied presupposition: if a sentence and its logical negation both seem equally untrue, then that sentence likely has an unsatisfied presupposition. There are a number of semantic and pragmatic theories that try to account for how to reconcile this puzzle; for our purposes, we will merely mention it as an intriguing facet of our use of language.

So far we have considered only presuppositions of existence, but there are also many other **presupposition triggers:** words or phrases whose use in a sentence often indicates the presence of a presupposition. We will provide only a small sample here. In each case, notice that if the presupposition is not satisfied, it is not clear whether the sentence containing the presupposition is true or false.

In (7), the presupposition trigger is the phrase *come back.* Think about what *come back* means. In order for a person to come back to a place, they must come to that place after having been there before at some time in the past. But *come back* doesn't mean 'be at a place, leave it, and then come to that place again.' It only has the meaning 'come to that place again.' The part about having been there before is presupposed.

(7) a. Linus came back to the pumpkin patch this October.
b. Linus did not come back to the pumpkin patch this October.

Therefore, the sentences in (7) presuppose that Linus had previously been in the pumpkin patch. If Linus had never been in the pumpkin patch before, then we cannot felicitously say that he came back, nor can we felicitously say that he did not come back. If Linus had never been to the pumpkin patch before, then (7a) and (7b) would both seem untrue. Moreover, if the speakers in a discourse do not know whether Linus has been to the pumpkin patch before or not, then it would be infelicitous to utter either (7a) or (7b).

Now consider the trigger *stop* in (8) and the trigger *after* in (9). Try not to worry too much about why they these words are triggers. Just think about what must be true in order for a person to felicitously say one of the sentences in (8) or (9).

(8) a. Alan stopped falling asleep during meetings.
b. Alan did not stop falling asleep during meetings.

(9) a. After the United States added a fifty-fourth state, the US flag design was modified to contain 54 stars.
b. After the United States added a fifty-fourth state, the US flag design was not modified to contain 54 stars. (Instead, the decision was made to keep the old flag design.)

Could one of the sentences in (8) be uttered if Alan had never fallen asleep during meetings? No; in such a case (8a) and (8b) would both be equally inadequate descriptions of the state of affairs: both would seem untrue. Thus we can conclude that *stop* triggers a presupposition that a person had to previously do whatever it is that he is supposed to have stopped. Therefore, if it were not common knowledge among the participants in a conversation that Alan used to fall asleep in meetings, a speaker could not felicitously utter either (8a) or (8b).

What about the sentences in (9)? Based on what you know about the world, is (9a) true or false? It doesn't seem to be either true or false: we cannot assess what did or didn't happen after the addition of a fifty-fourth state because (as of 2021, at which time the United States has only fifty states) no such addition has taken place. Therefore, (9a) is infelicitous, and (9b) is infelicitous for the same reason.

7.5.3 Prosody as a Presupposition Trigger

We will consider one more kind of presupposition trigger. The prosodic structure of utterances can also cause certain information to be presupposed. Recall from File 2.5 that we can use **pitch accents** to make some words more prominent than others. By our choices in where to put these pitch accents, we can force different information to be presupposed. (As in File 2.5, we capitalize words that are prosodically prominent.)

The way prosody affects presupposition can be seen in sentences containing certain additive words (e.g., *too, either, also,* and *as well*). Consider first the following:

(10) Laura drove to Toledo, too.

The *too* in (10) triggers a presupposition that something about this event is additional to another, related event. With no preceding context, an utterance of this sentence would be ambiguous, since it would not be clear what *too* was referring to. But consider what happens when a pitch accent is applied to different words in the sentence.

(11) a. Laura drove to TOLEDO, too.
b. LAURA drove to Toledo, too.

The prosodically prominent words tell us which part of the event *too* is referring to. In (11a), we know that Laura drove somewhere in addition to Toledo, and in (11b) that someone else drove to Toledo in addition to Laura.

The sentences in (11) are not felicitous out of context, because the presuppositions introduced by *too* and the pitch accent have not been satisfied: we do not know where else Laura drove, or who else drove to Toledo. But contextual information could be included in a preceding clause, as in (12):

(12) a. Laura drove to Cincinnati, and Laura drove to TOLEDO, too.
b. Shawn drove to Toledo, and LAURA drove to Toledo, too.

The preceding contexts satisfy the presuppositions triggered by *too* in combination with the pitch accent, making these utterances felicitous.

To make clear the importance of the role of prosody in triggering these presuppositions, consider the following:

(13) a. Shawn drove to Toledo, and Laura drove to Toledo, too.
b. #Shawn drove to Toledo, and Laura drove to TOLEDO, too.
c. Laura drove to Cincinnati, and Laura drove to Toledo, too.
d. #Laura drove to Cincinnati, and LAURA drove to Toledo, too.

In the examples without a prosodically prominent word (13a,c), the initial context provides information that satisfies the presupposition of *too* (since, as we saw in (10), the second part of the utterance is ambiguous on its own as to what part of the event *too* is referring to). But when the prosodically prominent word is *Toledo* as in (13b), the presupposition is specifically that Laura drove somewhere other than Toledo. This is not satisfied in the context given, which tells us only that someone else drove to Toledo. Similarly, the pitch accent on *Laura* in (13d) presupposes that someone in addition to

Laura drove to Toledo, which is not satisfied by the preceding context, making this utterance infelicitous.

7.5.4 Presupposition Accommodation

So far, we have assumed that the only way for a sentence containing a presupposition to be felicitous is if that presupposition is satisfied at the time the sentence is uttered. In fact, people use sentences containing presuppositions all the time when other participants in the conversation have no way of knowing the presupposed information ahead of time. Consider again Jan, who was late for a meeting in (3). She didn't get away with presupposing her pet giraffe. But suppose instead she had said one of the sentences in (14).

(14) a. I'm sorry that I was late to our meeting; I had to take my cat to the veterinarian.
b. I'm sorry that I was late to our meeting; my car broke down.

Both of these sentences also contain existence presuppositions: that Jan has a pet cat in the first case and a car in the second. Her co-worker is much less likely to object to these presuppositions, however, even if he did not previously know about the car or the cat. Because it is much more plausible that a person might have a car or a cat, Caleb **accommodates** the presupposed information, behaving as though he had known it all along and not objecting to its being inserted like this. You can think of accommodation as being sort of like retroactive satisfaction.

Notice, however, that we accommodate only presuppositions that we find plausible. There is no hard-and-fast standard for what is or isn't plausible, but some things (like giraffe ownership) are almost certainly too implausible to pass by without an objection.

There is one more requirement for presupposition accommodation in addition to plausibility. To illustrate, imagine that your roommate (whom you have not seen all day) comes home and exclaims the following:

(15) Roommate: Guess what I did today!
You: What?
Roommate: #I also aced my CHEMISTRY exam.

In this case, your roommate's last utterance would be infelicitous because it presupposes that they aced something in addition to their chemistry exam. But since they haven't told you what it was, you lack that knowledge at the time of utterance. While you can probably guess that they must have aced an exam in another class, rendering the presupposition plausible, you cannot access the specific referent. Since the presupposition is inaccessible, you cannot accommodate it.

By and large, if the content of a presupposition is both plausible and accessible, people will be willing to accommodate it. Suppose, for example, that you are indoors on a gloomy January day in Ohio and have not looked outside recently, when a friend says to you:

(16) I'm so happy it's snowing!

Although the sentence is about the friend's emotional state, it presupposes that it is snowing, a fact you previously did not know. Nonetheless, you would likely accommodate the presupposition. It is readily accessible, because it was contained directly in the sentence uttered, and it is plausible, because snow is fairly expected in January in Ohio.

It should not be surprising that this is the note we end on. As a general rule, in order for an utterance to be felicitous, any presuppositions it contains must be satisfied; however, very frequently presuppositions that were not satisfied before the utterance are accommodated afterwards based on elements of the context. Pragmatic rules, principles, and generalizations are all subject to factors that can be determined only from context.