Chapter 8

Speech Acts and Pragmatics

Kent Bach

At the beginning of *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin bemoaned the common philosophical pretense that “the business of a [sentence] can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact,’ which it must do either truly or falsely” (1962: 1). He observed that there are many uses of language which have the linguistic appearance of fact-stating but are really quite different. Explicit performatives like “You’re fired” and “I quit” are not used to make mere statements. And the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, rebelling against his former self, swapped the picture metaphor for the tool metaphor and came to think of language not as a system of representation but as a system of devices for engaging in various sorts of social activity; hence, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (1953: sec. 43, p. 20).

Here Wittgenstein went too far, for there is good reason to separate the theory of linguistic meaning (semantics) from the theory of language use (pragmatics), not that they are unconnected. We can distinguish sentences, considered in abstraction from their use, and the acts that speakers (or writers) perform in using them. We can distinguish what sentences mean from what speakers mean in using them. Whereas Wittgenstein adopted a decidedly anti-theoretical stance toward the whole subject, Austin developed a systematic, though largely taxonomic, theory of language use. And Paul Grice developed a conception of meaning which, though tied to use, enforced a distinction between what linguistic expressions mean and what speakers mean in using them.

A early but excellent illustration of the importance of this distinction is provided by Moore’s paradox (so-called by Wittgenstein 1953: 190). If you say, “Tomatoes are fruits but I don’t believe it,” you are denying that you believe what you are asserting. This contradiction is puzzling because it is not an outright logical inconsistency. That tomatoes are fruits does not entail your believing it, nor vice versa, and there’s no contradiction in *my* saying, “Tomatoes are fruits but you don’t believe it.” Your inconsistency arises not from what you are claiming but from the fact that *you* are claiming it. That’s what makes it a *pragmatic* contradiction.
Like pragmatic contradictions, pragmatic phenomena in general involve information that is generated by, or at least made relevant by, acts of using language. It is not to be confused with semantic information, which is carried by linguistic items themselves. This distinction should be kept in mind as we examine the nature of speech acts (including Austin’s explicit performatives), the intentions involved in communicating, and the ways in which what a speaker means can differ from what his words mean. Later we will return to the semantic–pragmatic distinction and survey its philosophical applications.

Performative Utterances

Paradoxical though it may seem, there are certain things one can do just by saying that one is doing them. One can apologize by saying “I apologize,” promise by saying “I promise,” and thank someone by saying “Thank you.” These are examples of explicit performative utterances, statements in form but not in fact. Or so thought Austin (1962) when he contrasted them with constatives. Performatives are utterances whereby we make explicit what we are doing.¹ Austin challenged the common philosophical assumption (or at least pretense) that indicative sentences are necessarily devices for making statements. He maintained that, for example, an explicit promise is not, and does not involve, the statement that one is promising. It is an act of a distinctive sort, the very sort (promising) named by the performative verb. Of course one can promise without doing so explicitly, without using the performative verb ‘promise,’ but if one does use it, one is, according to Austin, making explicit what one is doing but not stating that one is doing it.²

Austin eventually realized that explicit constatives function in essentially the same way. After all, a statement can be made by uttering “I assert . . . ” or “I predict . . . ,” just as a promise or a request can be made with “I promise . . . ” or “I request . . . .” So Austin let the distinction between constative and performative utterances be superseded by one between locutionary and illocutionary acts. He included assertions, predictions, etc. (he retained the term ‘constative’ for them) along with promises, requests, etc., among illocutionary acts. His later nomenclature recognized that illocutionary acts need not be performed explicitly – you don’t have to use “I suggest . . . ” to make a suggestion or “I apologize . . . ” to apologize.

Even so, it might seem that because of their distinctive self-referential character, the force of explicit performatives requires special explanation. Indeed, Austin supposed that illocutionary acts in general should be understood on the model of explicit performatives, as when he made the notoriously mysterious remark that the use of a sentence with a certain illocutionary force is “conventional in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula” (1962: 91). Presumably he thought that explicit performative utterances are conventional in some more straightforward sense. Since it is not part of the meaning of the word “apologize” that an utterance of “I apologize . . . ” count as an apology rather
than a statement, perhaps there is some convention to that effect. If there is, presumably it is part of a general convention that covers all performative verbs. But is there such a convention, and is it needed to explain performativity?³

P.F. Strawson (1964) argued that Austin was overly impressed with institution-bound cases. In these cases there do seem to be conventions that utterances of certain forms (an umpire’s “Out!,” a legislator’s “Nay!,” or a judge’s “Overruled!”) count as the performance of acts of certain sorts. Likewise with certain explicit performatives, as when under suitable circumstances a judge or clergyman says, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” which counts as joining a couple in marriage. In such cases there are specific, socially recognized circumstances in which a person with specific, socially recognized authority may perform an act of a certain sort by uttering words of a certain form.⁴ Strawson argued, though, that most illocutionary acts involve not an intention to conform to an institutional convention but an intention to communicate something to an audience. Indeed, as he pointed out, there is no sense of the word ‘conventional’ in which the use of a given sentence with a certain illocutionary force is necessarily conventional, much less a sense having to do with the fact that this force can be “made explicit by the performative formula.” In the relevant sense, an act is conventional just in case it counts as an act of a certain sort because, and only because, of a special kind of institutional rule to that effect. However, unlike the special cases Austin focused on, utterances can count as requests, apologies, or predictions, as the case may be, without the benefit of such a rule. It is perfectly possible to apologize, for example, without doing so explicitly, without using the performative phrase “I apologize . . . ” That is the trouble with Austin’s view of speech acts – and for that matter John Searle’s (1969), which attempts to explain illocutionary forces by means of “constitutive rules” for using “force-indicating devices,” such as performatives. These theories can’t explain the fact that, e.g., an apology can be made without using such a device.⁵ There is a superficial difference between apologizing explicitly (by saying, “I apologize”) and doing it inexplicitly, but there is no theoretically important difference.⁶ Except for institution-bound cases like those illustrated above, performativity requires no special explanation, much less a special sort of convention.⁷

**Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary Acts**

Austin dubbed “illocutionary” those sorts of speech acts that can (but need not) be performed by means of the performative formula. The illocutionary act is but one level of the total speech act that one performs in uttering a sentence. Consider that in general when one acts intentionally, one has a set of nested intentions. For instance, having arrived home without your keys, you might move your finger in a certain way with the intention not just of moving your finger in that way but with the further intentions of pushing a certain button, ringing the doorbell, arousing your spouse . . . and ultimately getting into your house. The single bodily
movement involved in moving your finger comprises a multiplicity of actions, each corresponding to a different one of the nested intentions. Similarly, speech acts are not just acts of producing certain sounds.

Austin identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and dubs these the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary act, respectively. Suppose, for example, that a bartender utters the words, “The bar will be closed in five minutes,” reportable with direct quotation. He is thereby performing the locutionary act of saying that the bar (i.e., the one he is tending) will be closed in five minutes (from the time of utterance), where what is said is reported by indirect quotation (notice that what the bartender is saying, the content of his locutionary act, is not fully determined by the words he is using, for they do not specify the bar in question or the time of the utterance). In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the patrons of the bar’s imminent closing and perhaps also the act of urging them to order a last drink. Whereas the upshot of these illocutionary acts is understanding on the part of the audience, perlocutionary acts are performed with the intention of producing a further effect. The bartender intends to be performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the patrons to believe that the bar is about to close and of getting them to order one last drink. He is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words.

We need the level of locutionary acts, acts of saying something, in order to characterize such common situations as these: where the speaker says one thing but, not speaking literally, means (in the sense of trying to convey) something else instead,8 where the speaker means what he says and indirectly means something else as well, and where the speaker says something but doesn’t mean anything at all.9 Moreover, the same sentence can be used to perform illocutionary acts of various types or with various contents. Just as in shaking hands we can, depending on the circumstances, do any one of several different things (introduce ourselves, greet each other, seal a deal, congratulate, or bid farewell), so we can use a sentence with a given locutionary content in a variety of ways. For example, we could utter ‘I will call a lawyer’ to make a promise or a warning, or just a prediction. Austin defines a locutionary act as the act of using words, “as belonging to a certain vocabulary . . . and as conforming to a certain grammar, . . . with a certain more or less definite sense and reference” (1962: 92–3). And what is said, according to Grice, is “closely related to the conventional meaning of the . . . sentence . . . uttered” and must correspond to “the elements of [the sentence], their order, and their syntactic character” (1989: 87). Although what is said is limited by this syntactic correlation constraint, because of ambiguity and indexicality it is not identical to what the sentence means. If the sentence is ambiguous, usually only one of its conventional (linguistic) meanings is operative in a given utterance (double entendre is a special case). And linguistic meaning does not determine what, on a given occasion, indexicals like ‘she’ and ‘this’ are used to refer to. If someone utters “She wants this book,” he is saying that a certain woman wants
a certain book, even though the words do not specify which woman and which book. So, along with linguistic information, the speaker’s semantic (disambiguating and referential) intentions are often needed to determine what is said.

We need the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts because utterances are generally more than just acts of communication. They have two levels of success: considered merely as an illocutionary act, a request (for example) succeeds if your audience recognizes your desire that they do a certain thing, but as a perlocutionary act it succeeds only if they actually do it. You can express your desire without getting compliance, but your one utterance is the performance of an act of both types.

### Classifying Illocutionary Acts

Speech acts may be conveniently classified by their illocutionary type, such as asserting, requesting, promising, and apologizing, for which we have familiar verbs. These different types may in turn be distinguished by the type of attitude the speaker expresses. Corresponding to each such attitude is a certain attitude on the part of the hearer (getting the hearer to form this correlative attitude is essential to the success of the perlocutionary act). Here are some typical examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illocutionary act</th>
<th>Attitude expressed</th>
<th>Intended hearer attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>statement</td>
<td>belief that p</td>
<td>belief that p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>request</td>
<td>desire for H to D</td>
<td>intention to D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promise</td>
<td>firm intention to D</td>
<td>belief that S will D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apology</td>
<td>regret for D-ing</td>
<td>forgiveness of S for D-ing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are examples of the four major categories of communicative illocutionary acts, which may be called constatives, directives, commissives, and acknowledgments.\(^{10}\) Here are some further examples of each type:

- **Constatives**: affirming, alleging, announcing, answering, attributing, claiming, classifying, concurring, confirming, conjecturing, denying, disagreeing, disclosing, disputing, identifying, informing, insisting, predicting, ranking, reporting, stating, stipulating
- **Directives**: advising, admonishing, asking, begging, dismissing, excusing, forbidding, instructing, ordering, permitting, requesting, requiring, suggesting, urging, warning
- **Commissives**: agreeing, betting, guaranteeing, inviting, offering, promising, swearing, volunteering
- **Acknowledgments**: apologizing, condoling, congratulating, greeting, thanking, accepting (acknowledging an acknowledgment)
If each type of illocutionary act is distinguishable by the type of attitude expressed, there is no need to invoke the notion of convention to explain how a particular act can succeed. An illocutionary act succeeds if the hearer recognizes the attitude being expressed, such as a belief in the case of a statement and a desire in the case of a request. As a perlocutionary act, a statement or an apology is successful if the audience accepts it, but illocutionary success does not require that. It requires only what is necessary for the statement or the apology to be made. As Strawson explains, the effect relevant to communicative success is understanding or what Austin called “uptake,” rather than a further (perlocutionary) effect, such as belief, desire, or even action on the part of the hearer. Indeed, an utterance can succeed as an act of communication even if the speaker doesn’t possess the attitude he is expressing, and even if the hearer doesn’t take him to possess it. Communication is one thing, sincerity another. Sincerity is actually possessing the attitude one is expressing.

Conventional illocutionary acts, the model for Austin’s theory, succeed not by recognition of intention, but by conformity to convention. That is, an utterance counts as an act of a certain sort by virtue of meeting certain socially or institutionally recognized conditions for being an act of that sort. They fall into two categories, **effectives** and **verdictives**, depending on whether they effect an institutional state of affairs or merely make an official judgment as to an institutionally relevant state of affairs. Here are some examples of each:

- **Effectives**: banning, bidding, censuring, dubbing, enjoining, firing, indicting, moving, nominating, pardoning, penalizing, promoting, seconding, sentencing, suspending, vetoing, voting
- **Verdictives**: acquitting, assessing, calling (by an umpire or referee), certifying, convicting, grading, judging, ranking, rating, ruling

To appreciate the difference, compare what a judge does when he convicts someone and when he sentences them. Convicting is the verdictive act of officially judging that the defendant is guilty. Whether or not the defendant actually committed the crime, the judge’s determination that he did means that the justice system treat this as being the case. However, in performing the effective act of sentencing him to a week in the county jail, the judge is not ascertaining that this is his sentence but is actually making it the case.

**Communicative Speech Acts and Intentions**

Our taxonomy accepts Strawson’s observation that most illocutionary acts are performed not with an intention to conform to a convention but with an audience-directed communicative intention. But what exactly is a communicative intention, and why are illocutionary acts generally communicative?
People commonly think of communicating, linguistically or otherwise, as acts of expressing oneself. This rather vague idea can be made more precise if we get more specific about what is expressed. Take the case of an apology. If you say, “I'm sorry I forgot your birthday” and intend this as an apology, you are expressing regret for something, in this case for forgetting the person’s birthday. An apology just is the act of (verbally) expressing regret for, and thereby acknowledging, something one did that might have harmed or at least bothered the hearer. It is communicative because it is intended to be taken as expressing a certain attitude, in this case regret. It succeeds as such if it is so taken, in which case one has made oneself understood. Using a special device such as the performative “I apologize” may of course facilitate understanding – understanding is correlative with communicating – but in general this is unnecessary. Communicative success is achieved if the speaker chooses his words in such a way that the hearer will, under the circumstances of utterance, recognize his communicative intention. So, for example, if you spill some beer on someone and say “Oops” in the right way, your utterance will be taken as an apology.

Grice discovered that there is something highly distinctive about communicative intentions: they are reflexive in character. In communicating a speaker intends his utterance “to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention” (1957/1989: 220). Consider that, in general, the success of an act has nothing to do with anyone’s recognizing the intention with which it is performed. You won’t succeed in standing on your head because someone recognizes your intention to do so. But an act of communication is special in this respect. It is successful if the intention with which it is performed is recognized by the audience, partly on the basis that it is intended to be recognized. The intention includes, as part of its content, that the audience recognize this very intention by taking into account the fact that they are intended to recognize it. A communicative intention is thus self-referential, or reflexive. An act of communication is successful if whoever it is directed to recognizes the intention with which it is performed. In short, its fulfillment consists in its recognition.

To appreciate the idea of reflexive intentions and what their fulfillment involves, consider the following games, which involve something like linguistic communication. In the game of Charades, one player uses gestures and other bodily movements to help the other guess what she has in mind. Something like the reflexive intention involved in communication operates here, for part of what the first player intends the second player to take into account is the very fact that the first player intends her gestures etc. to enable him to guess what she has in mind (nothing like this goes on in the game of Twenty Questions, where the second player uses answers to yes-or-no questions to narrow down the possibilities of what the first player has in mind). Or consider the following game of tacit coordination: the first player selects and records an item in a certain specified category, such as a letter of the alphabet, a liquid, or a city; the second player has one chance to guess what it is. Each player wins if and only if the second player...
guesses right without any help. Now what counts as guessing right depends entirely on what the first player has in mind, and that depends entirely on what she thinks the second player, taking into account that she wants him to guess right, will think she wants him to think. The second player guesses whatever he thinks she wants him to think. Experience has shown that when players use the above categories, they almost always both pick the letter A, water, and the city in which they are located. It is not obvious what all these “correct” choices have in common: each one stands out in a certain way from other members of the same category, but not in the same way. For example, being first (among letters of the alphabet), being the most common (among liquids), and being local are quite different ways of standing out. It is still not clear, in the many years since the question was first raised, just what makes something uniquely salient in such situations. One suggestion is that it is the first item in the category that comes to mind, but this won’t always be right, since what first comes to the mind of one player may not be what first comes to the mind of the other.

Whatever the correct explanation of the meeting of the minds in successful communication, the basic insight underlying Grice’s idea of reflexive intentions is that communication is like a game of tacit coordination: the speaker intends the hearer to reason in a certain way partly on the basis of being so intended. That is, the hearer is to take into account that he is intended to figure out the speaker’s communicative intention. The meaning of the words uttered provides the input to this inference, but what they mean does not determine what the speaker means (even if he means precisely what his words means, they don’t determine that he is speaking literally). What is loosely called ‘context,’ i.e., a set of mutual contextual beliefs (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 5), encompasses whatever other considerations the hearer is to take into account in ascertaining the speaker’s intention, partly on the basis that he is intended to do so.

When Grice characterized meaning something as intending one’s utterance “to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention,” he wasn’t very specific about the kind of effect to be produced. But since meaning something (in Grice’s sense) is communicating, the relevant effect is, as both Strawson (1964) and Searle (1969) recognized, understanding on the part of the audience. Moreover, an act of communication, as an essentially overt act, just is the act of expressing an attitude, which the speaker may or may not actually possess. Since the condition on its success is that one’s audience infer the attitude from the utterance, it is clear why the intention to be performing such an act should have the reflexive character pinpointed by Grice. Considered as an act of communication rather than anything more, it is an attempt simply to get one’s audience to recognize, partly on the basis of being so intended, that a certain attitude is being expressed. One is, as it were, putting a certain attitude on the table. The success of any further act has as its prerequisite that the audience recognize this attitude. Communication aims at a meeting of the minds not in the sense that the audience is to think what the speaker thinks but only in the sense that a certain attitude toward a certain proposition is to be recognized as
being put forward for consideration. What happens beyond that is more than communication.¹⁶

Conversational Implicature and Impliciture

A speaker can mean just what he says, or he can mean something more or something else entirely. Grice’s (1975) theory of conversational implicature aims to explain how.¹⁷ A few of his examples illustrate nonliterality, e.g., “He was a little intoxicated,” but most of them are cases of stating one thing by way of stating another, e.g., “There is a garage around the corner,” used to tell someone where to get gas, and “Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance has been regular,” used to state (indirectly) that Mr. X is not well qualified. These are all examples in which what is meant is not determined by what is said. Grice proposed a Cooperative Principle¹⁸ and several maxims which he named, in homage to Kant, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (Kant’s Modality). As he formulates them, they enjoin one to speak truthfully, informatively, relevantly, perspicuously, and otherwise appropriately.¹⁹ His account of implicature explains how ostensible violations of them can still lead to communicative success.

Although Grice presents them as guidelines for how to communicate successfully, I think they are better construed as presumptions made in the course of the strategic inference involved in communication (they should not be construed, as they often are, as sociological generalizations). The listener presumes that the speaker is being cooperative and is speaking truthfully, informatively, relevantly, perspicuously, and otherwise appropriately. If an utterance superficially appears not to conform to this presumption, the listener looks for a way of taking the utterance so that it does conform. He does so partly on the supposition that he is intended to. The speaker takes advantage of this in choosing his words to make evident his communicative intention. Because of their potential clashes, these maxims or presumptions should not be viewed as comprising a decision procedure. Rather, they provide different dimensions of considerations that the speaker may reasonably be taken as intending the hearer to take into account in figuring out the speaker’s communicative intention. Exploiting these presumptions, a speaker can say one thing and manage to mean something else, as with “Nature abhors a vacuum,” or means something more, as with “Is there a doctor in the house?” The listener relies on these presumptions to make a contextually driven inference from what the speaker says to what he means.

These maxims or presumptions do not concern what to convey at a given stage of a conversation (unless information of a very specific sort is required, say in answer to a question, there will always be many good ways to contribute a conversation). Rather, they frame how as a listener you are to figure out what the speaker is trying to convey, given the sentence he is uttering and what he is
saying in uttering it. Your job is to determine, given that, what he could have been trying to convey. Why did he say ‘believe’ rather than ‘know,’ ‘is’ rather than ‘seems,’ ‘soon’ rather than ‘in an hour,’ ‘warm’ rather than ‘hot,’ ‘has the ability to’ rather than ‘can’?

Grice’s notion of implicature can be extended to illocutionary acts. With indirection a single utterance is the performance of one illocutionary act by way of performing another. For example, we can make a request or give permission by way of making a statement, say by uttering “It’s getting cold in here” or “I don’t mind,” and we can make a statement or give an order by way of asking a question, such as “Is the Pope Catholic?” or “Can you open the door?” When an illocutionary act is performed indirectly, it is performed by way of performing some other one directly. When an utterance is nonliteral, as with likely utterances of “My mind got derailed” or “You can stick that in your ear,” we do not mean what our words mean but mean something else instead. the force or the content of the illocutionary act being performed is not the one that would be predicted just from the meanings of the words being used. Occasionally, utterances are both nonliteral and indirect. For example, one might utter “I love the sound of your voice” to tell someone nonliterally (ironically) that she can’t stand the sound of his voice and thereby indirectly to ask him to stop singing.

Grice gives the impression that the distinction between what is said and what is implicated is exhaustive (he counted irony, metaphor, and other kinds of figurative utterances as cases of implicature), but there is a common phenomenon that Grice seems to have overlooked. Consider that there are many sentences whose standard uses are not strictly determined by their meanings but are not oblique (implicature-producing) or figurative uses either. For example, if one’s spouse says “I will be home later” she is likely to mean that she will be home later that night, not merely at some time in the future. Or suppose your child comes crying to you with a minor injury and you say to him assuringly, “You’re not going to die.” You don’t mean that he will never die but merely that he won’t die from that injury. In both cases you do not mean precisely what you are saying but something more specific. In such cases what one means is what may be called an expansion of what one says, in that adding more words (‘tonight’ or ‘from that injury,’ in the examples) would have made what was meant fully explicit. In other cases, such as ‘Jack is ready’ and ‘Jill is late,’ the sentence does not express a complete proposition. There must be something which Jack is being claimed to be ready for and something which Jill is being claimed to be late to. In these cases what one means is a completion of what one says. In both sorts of case, no particular word or phrase is being used nonliterally and there is no indirection. Both exemplify conversational implicature, since part of what is meant is communicated not explicitly but implicitly, by way of expansion or completion. In implicature the speaker means something that goes beyond sentence meaning (ambiguity and indexicality aside) without necessarily implicating anything or using any expressions figuratively.
Conventional Implicature

Grice is usually credited with the discovery of conventional implicature, but it was originally Frege's (1892) idea – Grice merely labeled it. They both claimed that the conventional meanings of certain terms, such as ‘but’ and ‘still,’ make contributions to the total import of a sentence without bearing on its truth or falsity. In “She is poor but she is honest,” for example, the contrast between being poor and being honest due to the presence of ‘but,’ according to Grice “implied as distinct from being stated” (1961: 127). Frege and Grice merely appeal to intuition in suggesting that the conventional contributions of such terms do not affect what is said in utterances of sentences in which they occur.

In my opinion (Bach 1999b), the category of conventional implicature needlessly complicates Grice’s distinction between what is said and what is implicated. Indeed, apparent cases of conventional implicature are really instances of something else. There are two kinds of case to consider. The first involves expressions like ‘but’ and ‘still.’ If we abandon the common assumption that indicative sentences express at most one proposition, we can see that such expressions do contribute to what is said. With “She is poor but she is honest,” the main proposition is that she is poor and she is honest, and the additional proposition is that being poor precludes being honest. The intuition that the utterance can be true even if this secondary proposition is false is explained by the fact that the intuition is sensitive only to the main proposition. But what is said includes both.

The other kind of case is connected to Grice’s suggestion that conventional implicature involves the performance of “noncentral” speech acts (1989: 122). He had in mind the use of such expressions as these:24

after all, anyway, at any rate, besides, be that as it may, by the way, first of all, finally, frankly, furthermore, however, if you want my opinion, in conclusion, indeed, in other words, moreover, now that you mention it, on the other hand, otherwise, speaking for myself, strictly speaking, to begin with, to digress, to oversimplify, to put it mildly.

These are used to comment on the very utterance in which they occur – its force, point, character, or the role in the discourse. I see no reason to call these second-order speech acts ‘implicatures.’ In uttering “Frankly, the dean is a moron,” for example, you are not implying that you are speaking frankly, you are saying something about (providing a gloss or commentary on) your utterance. As a result, the contribution of an utterance modifier does not readily figure in an indirect report of what someone said, e.g., “He said that (*frankly) the dean is a moron.” Utterance modifiers are in construction syntactically but not semantically with the clauses they introduce.
The Semantic–Pragmatic Distinction

Historically, the semantic–pragmatic distinction has been formulated in various ways. These formulations have fallen into three main types, depending on which other distinction the semantic–pragmatic distinction was thought most to correspond to:

- linguistic (conventional) meaning vs. use;
- truth-conditional vs. non-truth-conditional meaning;
- context independence vs. context dependence.

In my view, none of these distinctions quite corresponds to the semantic–pragmatic distinction. The trouble with the first is that there are expressions whose literal meanings are related to use, such as the utterance modifiers mentioned above. It seems that the only way to specify their semantic contribution (when they occur initially or are otherwise set off) is to specify how they are to be used. The second distinction is inadequate because some expressions have meanings that do not contribute to truth-conditional contents. Paradigmatic are expressions like ‘Alas!,’ ‘Good-bye,’ and ‘Wow!,’ but utterance modifiers also illustrate this, as do such linguistic devices as it-clefts and wh-clefts, which pertain to information structure, not information content. The third distinction neglects the fact that some expressions, notably indexicals, are context-sensitive as a matter of their meaning.

A further source of confusion is the clash between two common but different conceptions of semantics. One takes semantics to be concerned with the linguistic meanings of expressions (words, phrases, sentences). On this conception, sentence semantics is a component of grammar. It assigns meanings to sentences as a function of the meanings of their semantically simple constituents, as supplied by lexical semantics, and their constituent structure, as provided by their syntax. The other conception takes semantics to be concerned with the truth-conditional contents of sentences (or, alternatively, of utterances of sentences) and with the contributions that expressions make to the truth-conditional contents of sentences in which they occur. The idea underlying this conception is that the meaning of a sentence, the information it carries, imposes a condition on what the world must be like in order for the sentence to be true.

Now the linguistic and the truth-conditional conceptions of semantics would come to the same thing if, in general, the linguistic meanings of sentences determined their truth conditions, and they all had truth conditions. Many sentences, though, are imperative or interrogative rather than declarative. These do not have truth conditions but compliance or answerhood conditions instead. Even if only declarative sentences are considered, in a great many cases the linguistic meaning of a sentence does not uniquely determine a truth condition. One reason for this is ambiguity, lexical or structural. The sentence may contain one or more ambiguous
words, or it may be structurally ambiguous. Or the sentence may contain indexical elements. Ambiguity makes it necessary to relativize the truth condition of a declarative sentence to one or another of its senses, and indexicality requires relativization to a context. Moreover, it is plausible to suppose that some sentences, such as ‘Jack was ready’ and ‘Jill had enough,’ though syntactically well formed, are semantically incomplete. In these cases, as observed earlier, the meaning of such a sentence does not fully determine a truth condition, even after ambiguities are resolved and references are fixed. Syntactic completeness does not guarantee semantic completeness.

In order to make sense of the semantic–pragmatic distinction, we need to take several other distinctions into account. The first involves context. It is a platitude that what a sentence means generally doesn’t determine what a speaker means in uttering it. The gap between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning is said to be filled by “context”: we say that what the speaker means somehow “depends on context,” or that “context makes it clear” what the speaker means. But there are two quite different sorts of context – call them wide and narrow context – and they play quite different roles. Wide context concerns any contextual information that is relevant to determining, in the sense of ascertaining, the speaker’s intention. Narrow context concerns information specifically relevant to determining, in the sense of providing, the semantic values of context-sensitive expressions (and morphemes of tense and aspect). Wide context does not literally determine anything. It is the body of mutually evident information that the speaker and the hearer exploit, the speaker to make his communicative intention evident and the hearer, taking himself to be intended to, to identify that intention.

There are also distinctions to be drawn with respect to the terms ‘utterance’ and ‘interpretation.’ An utterance can either be the act of uttering a sentence or the sentence uttered. Strictly speaking, it is the sentence that is uttered (the type, not the token) that has semantic properties. The act of uttering the sentence has pragmatic properties. The notion of the content of an utterance of a sentence has no independent theoretical significance. There is just the content of the sentence the speaker is uttering, which, being semantic, is independent of the speaker’s communicative intention, and the content of the speaker’s communicative intention. As for the term ‘interpretation,’ it can mean either the formal, compositional determination by the grammar of a language of the meaning of a sentence or the psychological process whereby a person understands a sentence or an utterance of a sentence. Using the phrase ‘utterance interpretation’ indiscriminately, as often happens, can only confound the issues. For example, talking about the interpretation of an utterance in a context rather than of a sentence with respect to a context leads to paradox. An oral utterance of “I am not speaking” or a waking utterance of “I am asleep” cannot fail to be false, and yet the sentences themselves are not necessarily false. Relative to me, the first is true whenever I am not speaking, and the second is true whenever I am asleep.

As for the semantic–pragmatic distinction, it can be drawn with respect to various things, such as ambiguities, implications, presuppositions, interpretations,
knowledge, processes, rules, and principles. I take it to apply fundamentally to types of information. Semantic information is information encoded in what is uttered – these are stable linguistic features of the sentence – together with any extralinguistic information that provides (semantic) values to context-sensitive expressions in what is uttered. Pragmatic information is the (extralinguistic) information the hearer relies on to figure out what the speaker is communicating. It is generated by, or at least made relevant by, the act of uttering it. This way of characterizing pragmatic information generalizes Grice’s point that what a speaker implicates in saying what he says is carried not by what he says but by his saying it and perhaps by his saying it in a certain way (1989: 39).

Applications of the Semantic–Pragmatic Distinction

Philosophers have long found it convenient to attribute multiple senses to problematic words like ‘and,’ ‘know,’ ‘appear,’ and ‘good.’ Grice deplores this tendency and recommends adoption of his “Modified Occam’s Razor: Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity” (1989: 47). Wielding it on the many philosophically significant expressions and constructions that would otherwise seem give rise to ambiguities and other semantic complications illustrates the value of enforcing the semantic–pragmatic distinction. Taking pragmatic considerations into account acknowledges that in everyday speech not just what a sentence means but the fact that someone utters it plays a role in determining what its utterance conveys. They explain how the things we mean can go beyond the things we say and still be understood.

The words ‘and’ and ‘or’ provide good illustrations. In logic ‘and’ is standardly represented as conjunction (‘&’), where the order of conjuncts doesn’t matter. Consider, for example, the difference between what is likely to be conveyed by utterances of (1) and (2).

(1) Hal got pneumonia and went to the hospital.
(2) Hal went to the hospital and got pneumonia.

Despite the difference in what utterances of (1) and (2) are likely to convey, it is arguable that the sentences themselves have the same semantic content: it is not the meaning of ‘and’ but the fact that the speaker utters the conjuncts in one order rather than the other that explains the difference in how each utterance is likely to be taken. If so, then any suggestion of temporal order, or even causal connection, is not a part of the semantic content of the sentence but is merely implicit in its utterance (Levinson 2000: 122–7). One piece of evidence for this is that such a suggestion may be explicitly canceled (Grice 1989: 39). One could utter (1) or (2) and continue, “but not in that order” without contradicting what one has just said. One would be merely canceling any suggestion, due to the order of presentation, that the two events occurred in that order.
Now it has been argued that passing Grice’s cancelability test does not suffice to show that the differences between the two sentences above is not a matter of linguistic meaning. Cohen (1971) and Carston (1988) have appealed to the fact that the difference is preserved when the conjunctions are embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, as here:

(3)  

a. If Hal got pneumonia and went to the hospital, he needed a doctor.

b. If Hal went to the hospital and got pneumonia, he needed a lawyer.

Also, the difference is apparent when the two conjunctions are combined:

(4)  

It’s worse to go to the hospital and get pneumonia than to get pneumonia and go to the hospital.

However, these examples do not show that the relevant differences are a matter of linguistic meaning. A simpler hypothesis, one that does not ascribe a temporal much less a causal meaning to ‘and,’ is that these examples, like the simpler (1) and (2), involve conversational impliciture, in which what the speaker means is an implicitly qualified version of what he says. Likely utterances of (1) and (2) are made as if they included an implicit ‘then’ after ‘and,’ and are likely to be taken accordingly (with (1) there is also likely to be an implicit ‘as a result’). The speaker is exploiting Grice’s maxim of manner in describing events in their order of occurrence, and the hearer relies on the order of presentation to infer the speaker’s intention in that regard. On the pragmatic approach, ‘and’ is treated as unambiguously truth-functional, without having additional temporal or causal senses.

Even though in logic ‘or’ is usually represented only as inclusive disjunction (‘\(\lor\)’), it is often thought that in English there is also an exclusive ‘or.’ Also, it has been thought that the presence of ‘or’ entails that the speaker does not know which of the disjuncts obtains. So consider (5) and (6), for example.

(5) You can have coffee, tea, or milk.

(6) Phaedo is in the den or the kitchen.

An utterance of (5) is likely to be taken as exclusive. This might seem to be a consequence of the presence of an exclusive ‘or,’ but a better explanation is that if the speaker meant that you could have more than one beverage he would have said so and that if he meant that you could have all three he would have used ‘and.’ As Levinson explains cases like this and a wide variety of others, “What isn’t said, isn’t” (2000: 31). As for (6), the exclusivity of the disjunction is explained by the fact that something can’t be in two places at once. Also, there is no reason to attribute an epistemic aspect to ‘or,’ for in uttering (6), the speaker is conversationally implicating that he doesn’t know which room the dog is in. This implica-
tion is not due to the meaning of the word ‘or’ but rather to the presumption that the speaker is supplying as much relevant and reliable information as he has. 28

The distinction between what an expression means and how it is used had a direct impact on many of claims formerly made by so-called ordinary-language philosophers. In ethics, for example, it was (and sometimes still is) supposed that because sentences containing words like ‘good’ and ‘right’ are used to express affective attitudes, such as approval or disapproval, such sentences are not used to make statements (and even that questions of value and morals are therefore not genuine matters of fact). This line of argument is fallacious. As G. E. Moore pointed out, although one expresses approval (or disapproval) by making a value judgment, it is the act of making the judgment, not the content of the judgment, that implies that one approves (1942: 540–5). Sentences used for ethical evaluation, such as ‘Loyalty is good’ and ‘Cruelty is wrong,’ are no different in form from other indicative sentences, which, whatever the status of their contents, are standardly used to make statements. This leaves open the possibility that there is something fundamentally problematic about their contents. Perhaps such statements are factually defective and, despite syntactic appearances, are neither true nor false. However, this is a metaphysical issue about the status of the properties to which ethical predicates purport to refer. It is not the business of the philosophy of language to determine whether goodness and wrongness are real properties (or whether the goodness of loyalty and the wrongness of cruelty are genuine matters of fact).

The fallacious line of argument exposed by Moore commits what Searle calls the “speech act fallacy.” Searle gives further examples, each involving a speech act analysis of a philosophically important word (1969: 136–41). These analyses claim that because ‘true’ is used to endorse or concede statements (Strawson), ‘know’ to give guarantees (Austin), and ‘probably’ to qualify commitments (Toulmin), those uses constitute the meaning of these words. In each case the mistake is the same: identifying what the word is typically used to do with its semantic content.

Searle also exposes the “assertion fallacy,” which confuses conditions of making an assertion with what is asserted. Here are two examples: because you would not assert that you believe something if you were prepared to assert that you know it, knowing does not entail believing; similarly, because one would not be described as trying to do something that involves no effort or difficulty, trying entails effort or difficulty. Grice (1961) identified the same fallacy in a similar argument, due to Austin, about words like ‘seems,’ ‘appears,’ and ‘looks’: since you would not say that a table looks old unless you (or your audience) doubted or were even prepared to deny that it was old, the statement that the table looks old entails that its being old is doubted or denied. This argument is clearly fallacious, since it draws a conclusion about entailment from a premise about conditions on appropriate assertion. Similarly, you wouldn’t say that someone tried to stand up if doing it involved no effort or difficulty, but this doesn’t show that trying to do something entails that there was effort or difficulty in doing it. You can misleadingly imply something without its being entailed by what you say.
As illustrated by many of the examples above, the semantic–pragmatic distinc-
tion helps explain why what Grice called “generalized” conversational implicature
is a pragmatic phenomenon, even though it involves linguistic regularities of sorts. 
They are cancelable, hence not part of what is said, and otherwise have all the
features of “particularized” implicatures, except that they are characteristically
associated with certain forms of words. That is, special features of the context of
utterance are not needed to generate them and make them identifiable. As a result,
they do not have to be worked out step by step in the way that particularized
implicatures have to be. Nevertheless, they can be worked out. A listener unfamil-
iar with the pattern of use could still figure out what the speaker meant. This
makes them standardized but not conventionalized.29

Finally, the semantic – pragmatic distinction seems to undermine any theoretical
role for the notion of presupposition, whether construed as semantic or pragmatic.
A semantic presupposition is a precondition for truth or falsity. But, as argued long
ago by Stalnaker (1974) and by Boër and Lycan (1976), there is no such thing: it is
either entailment or pragmatic. And so-called pragmatic presuppositions come to
nothing more than preconditions for performing a speech act successfully and
felicitously, together with mutual contextual beliefs taken into account by speakers
in forming communicative intentions and by hearers in recognizing them. In some
cases they may seem to be conventionally tied to particular expressions or con-
structions, e.g., to definite descriptions or to clefts, but they are not really. Rather,
given the semantic function of a certain expression or construction, there are
certain constraints on its reasonable or appropriate use. As Stalnaker puts it, a
“pragmatic account makes it possible to explain some particular facts about
presuppositions in terms of general maxims of rational communication rather
than in terms of complicated and ad hoc hypotheses about the semantics of

The examples we have considered illustrate the significance of the semantic–
pragmatic distinction and the rationale of trying to explain linguistic phenomena
in as general a way as possible. The explanatory strategy is to appeal to independ-
ently motivated principles and processes of rational communication rather than to
special features of particular expressions and constructions. It is applicable to
certain important topics in the philosophy of language taken up elsewhere in this
volume, including conditionals, the referential–attributive distinction, and prop-
ositional attitude ascriptions. Needless to say, the issues are more complex and
contentious than our discussion has indicated, but at least our examples illustrate
how to implement what Stalnaker has aptly described as “the classic Gricean
strategy: to try to use simple truisms about conversation or discourse to explain
regularities that seem complex and unmotivated when they are assumed to be facts
about the semantics of the relevant expressions” (1999: 8). Economy and plausi-
ibility of explanation are afforded by heeding the semantic – pragmatic distinction.
Rather than attribute dubious ambiguities or needlessly complex properties
to specific linguistic items, we proceed on the default assumption that uses of
language can be explained by means of simpler semantic hypotheses together
with general facts about rational communication. In this way, we can make sense of the fact that to communicate efficiently and effectively people rarely need to make fully explicit what they are trying to convey. Most sentences short enough to use in everyday conversation do not literally express things we are likely ever to mean, and most things we are likely ever to mean are not expressible by sentences we are likely ever to utter. That’s something to think about.

Notes

1 We generally do this by using a performative verb like ‘promise,’ ‘pronounce,’ ‘apologize,’ or ‘request’ in a sentence beginning with ‘I’ followed by a performative verb in present tense and active voice. The first-person plural is possible too (“We promise . . .”), as is the second-person passive (“Smoking is prohibited”). The word ‘hereby’ may be inserted before the performative verb to indicate that the utterance in which it occurs is the vehicle of the performance of the act in question.

2 However, it does seem that in uttering, say, “I promise you a rose garden,” a speaker is at least saying that he is promising the hearer a rose garden. And what he is saying is true just in case he is making that promise.

3 Of course, every utterance is conventional insofar it is made with linguistic means. The question here, though, is whether special conventions are needed to explain the performativity of certain utterances.

4 Austin’s focus on such cases led him to develop an account of what it takes for these formalized utterances to be performed successfully and a classification of the various things that can go wrong (“flaws,” “hitches,” and other sorts of “infelicities”).

5 It follows that an account of explicit performatives should not appeal, as Searle’s (1989) elaborate account does, to any special features of the performative formula. Bach and Harnish (1992) argue that Searle’s account is based on a spurious distinction between having a communicative intention and being committed to having one and on a confusion between performativity and communicative success.

6 There numerous other forms of words which are standardly used to perform speech acts of certain types without making explicit the type of act of being performed, e.g. “It would be nice if you . . .” to request, “Why don’t you . . .?” to advise, “Do you know . . .?” to ask for information, “I’m sorry” to apologize, and “I wouldn’t do that” to warn. Even in the case of hedged and embedded performatives, such as “I can assure you . . .,” “I must inform you . . .,” “I would like to invite you . . .,” and “I am pleased to be able to offer you . . .,” in which the type of act is made explicit, the alleged conventions for simple performative forms would not apply. For discussion of hedged and embedded performatives, see Fraser (1975) and Bach and Harnish (1979: 209–19).

7 The variety of linguistic forms that can be used to perform a given sort of speech act is too open-ended to be plausibly explained by a special convention that specifies just those linguistic forms whose utterance counts as the performance of an act of that sort. Their standardization does not show that they are governed by special conventions. Rather, it provides a precedent that serves to streamline the inference required for their successful performance (see Bach, 1995).
In fact, Grice oddly claimed that in speaking nonliterally, as in irony and metaphor, one is not saying anything but merely “making as if to say” (1989, p. 30). This was because he understood saying something to entail meaning it. He seems to have conflated the locutionary act of saying with the illocutionary act of stating (to be sure, we often use the word ‘say’ for both).

These are three reasons why the notion of locutionary acts is indispensable, as Bach & Harnish (1979, pp. 288–9) argue in reply to Searle (1968).

A detailed taxonomy is presented in Bach and Harnish (1979, ch. 3), where each type of illocutionary act is individuated by the type of attitude expressed. In some cases there are constraints on the content as well. We borrow the terms ‘constative’ and ‘commissive’ from Austin and ‘directive’ from Searle. We adopt the term ‘acknowledgment’ rather than Austin’s ‘behabitive’ or Searle’s ‘expressive’ for apologies, greetings, thanks, congratulations, condolences, etc., which express an attitude to the hearer that is occasioned by some event that is thereby being acknowledged, often in satisfaction of a social expectation.

The difference between expressing an attitude and actually possessing it is clear from the following definition: to express an attitude in uttering something is reflexively (see the next section) to intend the hearer to take one’s utterance as reason to think one has that attitude. This reason need not be conclusive and if in the context it is overridden, the hearer will, in order to identify the attitude being expressed, search for an alternative and perhaps nonliteral interpretation of the utterance. For discussion see Bach and Harnish (1979, pp. 57–9 and 289–91).

Correlatively, the hearer can understand the utterance without regarding it as sincere, e.g., take it as expressing regret without believing that the speaker regrets having done the deed in question. Getting one’s audience to believe that one actually possesses the attitude one is expressing is not an illocutionary but a perlocutionary act.

This distinction and the following examples are drawn from Bach & Harnish (1979, ch. 6).

Partly because of certain alternative wordings and perhaps indecision (compare his 1969 with his 1957 article), Grice’s analysis is sometimes interpreted as defining communicative intentions iteratively rather than reflexively, but this not only misconstrues Grice’s idea but leads to endless complications (see Strawson, 1964, and especially Schiffer, 1972, for good illustrations). Recanati (1986) has pointed to certain problems with the iterative approach, but in reply I have argued (Bach, 1987) that these problems do not arise on the reflexive analysis.

This question was raised by Schelling, who was the first to discuss games of tacit coordination (1960, pp. 54–8).

If the hearer thinks the speaker actually possesses the attitude he is expressing, in effect she is taking him to be sincere in what he is communicating. But there is no question about his being sincere in the communicative intention itself, for this intention must be identified before the question of his sincerity (in having that attitude) can even arise. In other words, deceiving your audience about your real attitude presupposes successfully expressing some other attitude. You can be unsuccessful in conveying your communicative intention – by being too vague, ambiguous, or metaphorical, or even by being wrongly taken literally – but not insincere about it.

For a review of earlier approaches, to what used to be called “contextual implication,” see Hungerland (1960).
18 In Bach and Harnish (1979, p. 7), we replace Grice’s Cooperative Principle with our own CP, the “Communicative Presumption.” This is the mutual belief when one person says something to another, he does so with a recognizable communicative intention.

19 For discussion of Grice’s maxims, their weaknesses, and their conflicts, see Harnish (1976: 330–40), and see Levinson (2000) for extensive discussion and adaptation of them to various types of generalized conversational implicature.

20 Two Gricean approaches to indirect speech acts are presented in Searle (1975) and Bach and Harnish (1979, chs. 4 and 9).

21 These ideas are presented in Bach (1994). Sperber and Wilson speak of implicitures as the ‘explicit’ content of an utterance, but their neologism ‘explicature’ (1986, p. 182) for this in-between category is rather misleading. It is a cognate of ‘explicate,’ not ‘explicit,’ and explicating, making something explicit that isn’t, is not the same thing as making it explicit in the first place. That’s why I prefer the neologism ‘impliciture,’ since in these cases part of what is meant is communicated only implicitly.

22 Recanati (1989) suggests that on intuitive grounds the notion of what is said should be extended to cover such cases, but clearly he is going beyond Grice’s understanding of what is said as corresponding to the constituents of the sentence and their syntactic arrangement. The syntactic correlation constraint entails that if any element of what the speaker intends to convey does not correspond to any element of the sentence he is uttering, it is not part of what he is saying. Of course it may correspond to part of what he is asserting, but I am not using ‘say’ to mean ‘assert.’ In the jargon of speech act theory, saying is locutionary, not illocutionary. Recanati and I have renewed our debate on whether intuition or syntax constrains what is said in Recanati (2001) and Bach (2001).

23 Utterances like “You’re not going to die” may be described as cases of sentence non-literality, because the words are being used literally but the sentence as a whole is being used loosely. Compare the sentence mentioned in the text with sentence, “Everybody is going to die,” which would likely to be used in a strictly literal way.

24 A classification of these and many other utterance modifiers is given in Bach (1999b, sec. 5).

25 For a collection of sample formulations, see the Appendix to Bach (1999a).

26 For this reason, I do not accept Stalnaker’s contention that “we need a single concept of context that is both what determines the contents of context-dependent expressions, and also what speech acts act upon” (1999a, p. 4).

27 This conception of the distinction is defended and contrasted with alternatives in Bach (1999a). To the extent that the debate about the semantic-pragmatic distinction isn’t entirely terminological, perhaps the main substantive matter of dispute is whether there is such a thing as “pragmatic intrusion,” whereby pragmatic factors allegedly contribute to semantic interpretation. Various linguistic phenomena have been thought to provide evidence for pragmatic intrusion, hence against the viability of the semantic-pragmatic distinction, but in each case, in my opinion (Bach, 1999a), this is an illusion, based on some misconception about the distinction. When it and the related distinctions enumerated above are observed, there is no issue of pragmatic intrusion. Levinson (2000) argues that many alleged cases of pragmatic intrusion are really instances of generalized conversational implicature, which he thinks is often misconstrued as a purely semantic phenomenon.
28 This sounds like a combination of Grice’s Quantity and Quality maxims, or what Harnish proposed as the “Maxim of Quantity-Quality: Make the strongest relevant claim justifiable by your evidence” (1976: 340; see also p. 361, n. 46).

29 Levinson describes them as “default meanings,” but he does not mean sentence meanings. He thinks of them as comprising an “intermediate layer” of meaning, of “systematic pragmatic inference based not on direct computations about speaker-intentions but rather on general expectations about how language is normally used, [. . . which] give rise to presumptions, default inferences, about both content and force” (2000: 22). In my view, this does not demonstrate an intermediate layer of meaning – there is still only linguistic meaning and speaker meaning – but rather the fact that speakers’ communicative intentions and hearers’ inference are subject to certain systematic constraints based on practice and precedent (see Bach, 1995).

Further Reading


Levinson, S.C. (2000). Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. This monumental work reformulates Grice’s maxims, examines a huge range of linguistic data, and presents an account of the systematic ways in which we mean more than we say.


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