# Session: Semantic Models and Cognitive Semantics

## Some aspects of truth-conditional semantics

### Some basic notions

Deconstruct the following statements about “truth” semantics.

“Truth is a property of sentences that corresponds to a reality they describe”

“Meaning can … be defined in terms of the conditions that hold for a sentence to be true”

(Evans and Green 2006, p.446)

Give some examples of

a) sentence that by these claims would be true and

b)some that would not be true.

### Austin’s notions of meaning

Tarski, a bit simplistically put, postulates the necessity of a *metalanguage* to assess truth. This metalanguage cannot be a natural language as language that is used to define its own meanings fails to be objective and free from the ambiguities of everyday language. A metalanguage would not be, but…

Austin in his discussion of *speech acts* illustrates how natural language fails to be precise in terms of truth conditions, because only certain utterances are about the actual state of reality. He distinguishes between *constatives* and *performatives*, the former relating to observable reality, the latter not because by the speakers making the utterance they perform a speech act that is not directly related to observable reality.

a) Formulate a number of utterances that are constative and a number of utterances that are performative.

b) Would you use the adverb hereby in both of the following sentences?

1. The judge said: “I sentence you to twenty years in prison.”
2. The judge sentenced the accused to twenty years in prison.
3. I really hate you.

### Propositions and sentences

In the following, which sentences (grammatically well-formed utterances) contain the same, which ones have different propositions. What creates different propositions where they occur?

1. a. John loves Mary.  
   b. Mary loves John.
2. a. John met Mary in Greece.  
   b. Mary met John in Greece.
3. a. Mary played the piano sonata.  
   b. The piano sonata was played by Mary.
4. a. This books sells very well.   
   b. The booksellers sell this book very often.

### Isolating elements of word and sentence meaning

a) Try to determine the elements of meaning in the individual words of the following sentences, then discuss why and how the following sentences are “acceptable” or not.

b) Try to account for this by formulating rules (Hint: syntactically which elements need to be there, and which ones are not so clearly needed? Also which elements of meaning need to be observed for a sentence to be acceptable.) What kind of problems do you see?

1. The king of Switzerland is a woman.
2. Yesterday John gave a book to his hyperactive friend.
3. Mary gave her brother a black eye last week.
4. Many angry sugars dreamt a cold lover.

## Relevance theory

Sperber and Wilson’s approach is thought by cognitive semanticists to be in contrast to their thinking which denies the dichotomy between semantics and pragmatics. Sperber and Wilson would see themselves as involved in pragmatics.

(There is a question on this issue at the end of this section.)

### Inference

The cognitive environment of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him . . . A fact is manifest to an individual at a given time [if and only if] he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true . . . an individual’s total cognitive environment is the set of all the facts he can perceive or infer . . . a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities . . . The total shared environment of two people is the intersection of their two total cognitive environments, i.e. the set of all facts that are manifest to them both. (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 39–41 as quoted in Evans and Green, 2006, p. 460)

Also consider this comment from the same source: “… the ‘**Cognitive Principle of Relevance**’ … states that ‘Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance’ (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158)”.

Explain the following exchange in terms of the above quotes and show how their the interlocutors are likely to look for and will probably find the optimally relevant interpretation.

1. A: Have you filled up the car?  
   B: The garage was closed.
2. A: Would it be fair to say that the initiative of the committee has turned out to be a complete fiasco?  
   B: I couldn’t possibly comment.
3. A: *(at a party,* *tilting her head towards the door)* Will you be much longer?  
   B: Coming, darling! *(towards another interlocutor)* Sorry…
4. A: Does this dress make me look clumsy?  
   B: It actually accentuates the colour of your skin.

### Explicature and Implicature

**Explicature** describes something that is communicated directly and explicitly and does – apparently – not need interpretation from the context. **Implicature** refers to an utterance that needs a context to be understood by an interlocutor, who does not state explicitly what is s/he means.

In what way are the following examples instances of explicature or implicature and in what context?

1. Honey, I’m home!
2. This bank was closed to the public today.
3. That was the last straw.
4. That ship has sailed.
5. Your bedroom is eligible for disaster relief.

Where is shared knowledge needed and what kind of knowledge would it be?

### Relevance Theory briefly summarized

Sperber and Wilson’s ideas of Relevance Theory are summarised by Evans and Green as follows:

* [Relevance Theory is] [p]rimarily concerned with accounting for ostensive-inferential communication; language is just one form of this.
* Shared knowledge is the ‘mutual cognitive environment’.
* Cognition is driven by the [interlocutors’] search for relevance (Cognitive Principle of Relevance); relevance yields contextual effects.
* Acts of ostensive communication (including utterances) presume their own *optimal* relevance. [emphasis added]
* Optimal relevance means that the information is worth retrieving and that the hearer has chosen the most relevant means of communicating.
* While explicature and implicature roughly correspond to semantic and pragmatic meaning, respectively, both rely upon inference, which is relevance-driven.
* Metaphors (and other forms of figurative language) are interpreted according to the same principles as literal utterances; they are relevance-driven in nature [but]provide a richer set of inferences than literal utterances. (2006, p. 464)

Try to find an illustration or practical example for each of the aspects presented above.

### Final discussion question

Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory is seen as being situated in Pragmatics. How would a cognitive semanticists, who would most likely dispute the dichotomy between linguistic meaning and an interpretation based on Pragmatics, deal with the pragmatic aspects of meaning in the examples presented?