

Dialogue 1

Human Communication

Lecture 20

Central points

- Requests: literal vs. non-literal force.
- “Doing things with words”
- What’s meant vs. what’s said.
- The need to interpret talk in terms of what the speaker believes, wants, and intends to do.

What's said; what's meant (a)

(1) Can you close the door?

(2) You ought to close the door.

(3) May I ask you to close the door?

(1), (2) and (3) are not interpreted literally.

They are all requests:

(4) I request you to close the door.

What's said; what's meant (b)

- But (1) and (3) are literally a question. (2) is a statement.
- So (1-3) have the “force” of (4) because of our guess as to what the speaker wants.
- You should not just respond to the literal meaning!
- The question in this case *performs an act* different from asking a question

When things go wrong ...

- Here's what can happen when you're taken too literally



Or conversely ...

... “So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?”

Alice made a short calculation and said “Seven years and six months.”

“Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it!”

“I thought you meant ‘How old *are* you?’ Alice explained.

“If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty.

More things going wrong (a)

(5) a. Alf: *I was wondering whether I could buy two of the best seats in the house for the opera on Saturday.*

b1. Bert: *I'm afraid we don't have two available seats together in the highest price range. The closest two seats are separated by three rows. I could give you two seats together at the rear of the stalls.*

b2. Bert: *Oh really? I was wondering whether to go to Ibiza for my holidays.*

More things going wrong (b)

- Bert guesses what Alf wants, given that he asked the question (5a), namely two seats *together*.
- Bert anticipates what Alf's next question would be in (5b1), given that the literal answer to the implied question in (5a) is no.
- Humans are good at working out what people think ("*mean*") from what they say; obviously no-one would answer as in 5b2.
- It is very difficult to explain how this is done in enough detail to program a computer to behave in a similar way.

What's meant vs. what's said, again

(6) (Feeling terrible with a hangover, and looking in the mirror:) *Oh, I look terrific!*

(7) *I literally cried my eyes out.*

- Sarcasm; irony; hyperbole; metaphor: the connection between what's actually said and what's meant can be very loose!
- So the influence of what people believe and intend to convey typically has a very strong influence on how we interpret talk.

Speech acts

- Speech acts are acts that we perform by speaking
- Originally identified by John L. Austin in *How to Do Things with words*
- E.g. *requesting*
- ... also asking, asserting, ordering, promising, blaming, ...
- If we e.g. ask a question directly and mean it in a straightforward way, we're performing a *direct* speech act
- Speech acts are also called *illocutions*: the speech act that an utterance performs is its *illocutionary force*
- (We may not use this terminology much, but you will often find it in the literature)

Indirect speech acts (a)

- Indirect Speech Act

If:

- Non-literal meaning and literal meaning aren't performing the same action (*speech act*)
- Non-literal meaning should affect the actions of the hearer (unlike e.g. sarcasm)

then:

non-literal meaning is an *indirect speech act*

- as in a question that really issues a request, etc.

Indirect speech acts (b)

- An example:

(8) *I was wondering whether you could pass me the salt.*

This is a DECLARATIVE statement (an assertion); true or false. But that's not what's really going on! I want you to pass me the salt; any other response isn't what I want.

You shouldn't answer: "Really? How interesting ...".

Many forms possible ...

- All of the sentences in (10) have the force of the indirect speech act (9).

(9) *I request you to pass the salt.*

(10) a. *May I have the salt please?*

b. *Is it possible for you to pass the salt?*

c. *If it's not too much trouble, I would like the salt.*

d. *I was wondering, could I have the salt?*

and many more. . .

Searle's procedure for analysis

- John Searle developed much of the theory of speech acts

Step 1: Understand the facts of the conversation.

Step 2: Assume cooperation and relevance on behalf of the participants.

Step 3: Establish factual background information pertinent to the conversation.

Step 4: Make assumptions about the conversation based on steps 1–3.

Step 5: If steps 1–4 do not yield a consequential meaning, then infer that there are two illocutionary forces at work.

Step 6: Assume the hearer has the ability to perform the act the speaker suggests. (The act that the speaker is asking be performed must be something that would make sense for one to ask.)

Step 7: Make inferences from steps 1–6 regarding possible primary illocutions.

Step 8: Use background information to establish the primary illocution

Some examples

1. Examples of speech acts - informal:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Yy3neW-FzA&NR=1&feature=fvwp>

2. Johnny Depp interview with Letterman (3:30 to 4:15):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnB--PVtBaM>

3. Blair and Paxman:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJljTviLLTs&feature=related>

4. Jack Dee argument (to 2:00):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9Eci0OJbJw>

Questions

- What is going on in these - identify the direct and indirect speech acts, and what is intended....
- How does what each person says differ from what they intend?
- What are the communicative goals of each of the participants?