

LANGUAGE IN USE : Or, Building a Fire in a Wooden Stove on a Sinking Ship

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Language is not only necessary for the formulation of thought but is part of the thinking process itself . . . Talking about language is building a fire in a wooden stove. Talking about knowledge or science is rebuilding a boat plank by plank while staying afloat in it.

- Dwight Bolinger

There's a certain Slant of light
Winter Afternoons -----
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -----

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -----
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are ----- . . .

- Emily Dickinson, 1861?, 1890

The psycholinguist is concerned with internal meanings, those inside the language user. Having no direct access to what goes on inside the language user's head, psycholinguists attempt to infer internal meanings by studying language behaviour and the way people reason, express themselves, and relate to each other . . . Pragmatics being a study of how language functions, it stands in relation to linguistics, somewhat as physiology (the study of organic functions) stands in relation to anatomy (the study of organic structure).

- Anatol Rapaport

The term *pragmatics* is now used to refer to the systematic interaction of sentences with contexts. It is also used to refer to judgments that involve factual assumptions, [or] nongeneral knowledge and beliefs involved in situations of use.

- George Dillon

Pragmatics : the relation between linguistic expressions and their users.

– *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*

English speakers are notoriously indirect and vague much of the time. Of course, they are quite capable of making direct, unambiguous statements, particularly when they are describing or explaining something. But when they are interacting socially, they are often hard to understand. Not that the words and phrases and clauses that they utter are so difficult! What I'm talking about is the native English speakers, persistent habit of not saying what they mean.

There must be a reason for this state of affairs, or many reasons, but I am not going to concern myself with the question of why English speakers behave so outrageously. Mostly because I don't know how to answer the question, but also because it is more interesting to describe the English speakers' indirection.

For example, once at a dinner party in Bangkok the hostess asked me whether I preferred white wine or red wine. An Englishman sitting across the table from me interjected this interesting comment: He said to the hostess "Oh, he wouldn't know the difference. He's an American."

Curiously, this was an intentional insult. And it is a very interesting insult at this moment as I am writing this essay. It exemplifies not so much rudeness but the following principle:

Speakers treat items in the situations that are present to them and to the Hearers, and that are implicit in conversation, as *known information*.

We presume that when someone speaks, whatever he says is somehow relevant to the situation. Since this is true, the Hearers in the dinner-party situation had to make an inference: that Americans don't know very much about wine.

Now since this inference is patently untrue (Americans generally know quite a bit about wine, particularly middle-class, educated professionals), its meaning cannot be found in the linguistic structure of what the Englishman said or in the linguistic structure of the inference that the Hearers made.

Isn't this an interesting problem?

Shared (known) information allows us to presuppose that some things are so assumed to be true that it is not necessary to state them. Such a *presupposition* is a relationship between two linguistic entities. Questions invariably represent presuppositions. For example:

1. Have you stopped mistreating your servants?
(You were mistreating your servants)
2. Have you stopped cheating on your taxes?
(You were cheating on your taxes)

Or with WH-questions :

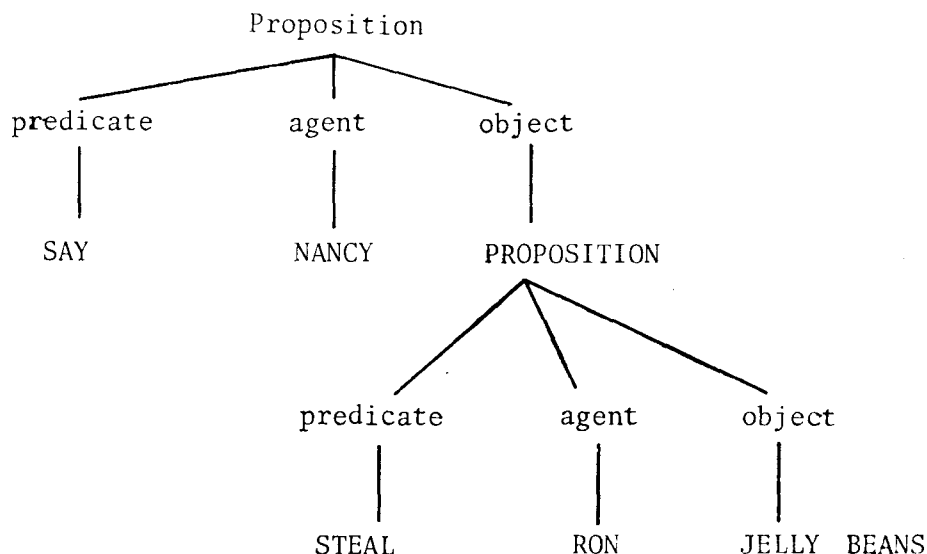
1. Who destroyed Sennacherib?
(Somebody did)
2. What did the Assyrians do?
(The Assyrians did something)

But less obviously many predicates contain presuppositions as components of meaning. That is, a predicate may contain both an *assertion* and a *presupposition*. For example, given the sentence:

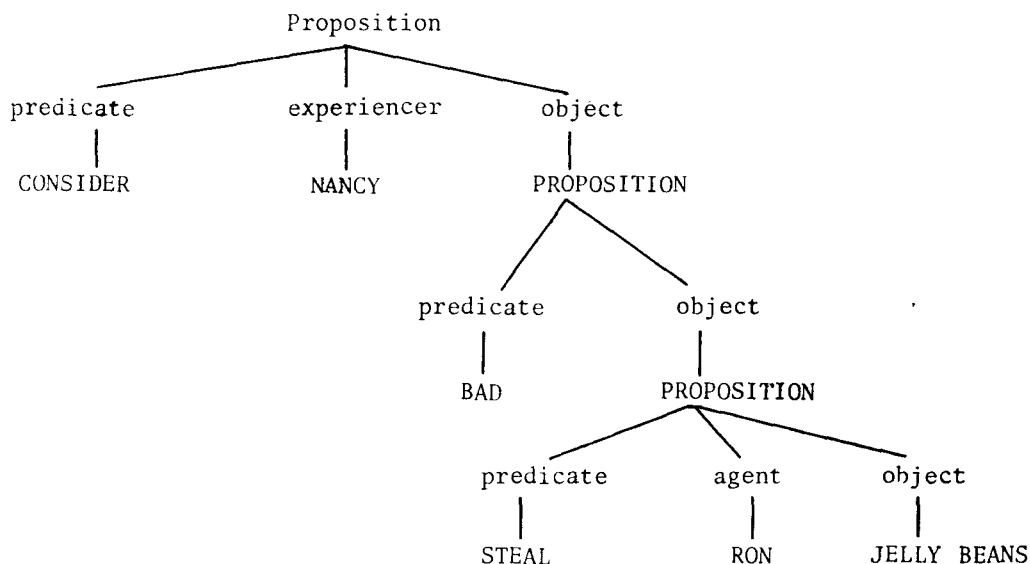
Nancy *accused* Ron of stealing jelly beans

the predicator *accused* is understood as containing a relation between two entities :

ENTITY # 1. ASSERTION



ENTITY # 2. PRESUPPOSITION



Usually such presuppositions are apparent to Speakers and Hearers in situations. And usually second language learners have enough experience in decoding meanings in conversation in their native language so they can carry their skills over into the second language as long as people talk plainly and say what they mean.

Accomplished Speakers assess very carefully what is established in the Hearers' consciousness. They listen carefully when they are Hearers. They take great pains to find out what their Hearers know and believe to be true. They make sure that they share enough with their Hearers so that they can negotiate an intersubjective reality with them. When Speakers and Hearers share the same reality, and they use plain talk, then often satisfactory communication takes place.

Unfortunately, some Speakers do not assess what is established in the Hearers' consciousness with great care. Among these careless Speakers may be found rude, preoccupied, self-absorbed people, children, schizophrenics and professors.

But this is only the beginning of the solution to the problem of figuring out how the dinner party guests understood the Englishman's insulting remark.

Perhaps we should divide up everything that is said into two classes, into *constatives* and *performatives*. Constatives are utterances that by their very nature are either true or false. For example :

1. The Evening Star is Venus.
2. The Morning Star is Venus.
3. The Moon is made of green cheese.
4. Presupposition is a relation between linguistic entities.

Thank Goodness that truth and falsehood lie outside language! In the demonstrable physical world and in the comprehensible formal world we find that we can agree on what is true and on what is false, most of the time. There exists a basic, rational function of meaning in language that allows us to utter constatives. And this is the easy part. Normally a second language learner first acquires a competence in using constatives because they are the sorts of utterance that are most universal and general. They are easy to translate and understand, everything else being equal. They concern a shared *objective* reality. They do not concern *social control*, getting people to do what we want. Constatives are statements, descriptions, arguments (in the logical sense), *sayings* about an objective reality.

Performatives are not sayings, but *doings*. They are utterances that we use to get people to do our bidding. They are promises, bets, warnings, requests, hints, orders (Austin, 1962). Performatives are *acts* -- *speech acts*. For example, if a judge says to a prisoner "I hereby sentence you to eat butter on your red rice," the sentencing is in and of itself an act. It is not an utterance that is a saying about something. It is a doing of something.

Now this is a happy state of affairs. Wouldn't it be nice if you could tell what people mean to do to you by means of a word that they include in what they say? If people could be required by law to utter a precise performative word each time they interact socially with others, the world of language would be a much simpler place. For example :

1. I hereby *insult* you. Your mother wears army boots.
2. I *order* you to shut up.
3. I *tell* you to go away.
4. I *request* that you take your hand off my head.
5. I *inform* you that I do not like Americans.
6. I *want* you to give me money. Buy my wares.
7. I *promise* you that if you vote for me you will not suffer as much as your neighbors.

But such is human nature that people, particularly English-speaking people, do not take the trouble to announce the intention of what they are doing much of the time. We are all guilty of this indirection. Instead of using performative words in dealing with other people, we use words that must be interpreted according to rather elaborate rules. If, for example, we are eating dinner, and we run out of rice, the head of the table might say, in a rather loud voice, so that the servant girl outside in the kitchen can hear him, "Rice!" Or if the servant is in the dining room, he might say, "There is no more rice."

Now what is the servant or waiter supposed to infer from these utterances? It is obvious that uttering one word without any kind of logical proposition of which it is a part is an illogical sort of thing to do. Similarly, making a statement about an existential situation leaves all of the inference up to the person to whom the statement is addressed. Why doesn't the head of the table say what he means?

Because there is a division between the literal meaning of what we say and the real meaning of what we say.

Peace.

The real meaning of what we say has been called the *Illocutionary Force* (Austin, 1962). This illocutionary force is not the *Locutionary Force*. The locutionary force is literally what we say, not its meaning. The locutionary force, or literal meaning, is cognitive and referential. It has its greatest use in making constative (true/false) utterances. Very often what we say is not what we mean! We talk and we dissemble. What we say seems like a lie to anyone who takes us literally. But we must know the rules for interpreting the intention of Speakers. And then, when we know the rules, what may we infer from this tissue of lies that Speakers lay on us?

Here is the crux of the problem of explaining how the Englishman insulted the American.

I once asked a Japanese student, "How did you enjoy your dinner, Mr. Takahashi?" His eyes glazed over as he concentrated all his attention on decoding the question. His lips moved as he subvocalized the words of the question. Finally he answered, "I ate it."

Poor, literal-minded Mr. Takahashi! I could almost see his computer blinking as he processed *How* with its first dictionary meaning "in what manner or way," instead of "to what degree or extent." He did not know that much speech is simply *phatic*, that it is serious but that it exists only to keep the channels of communication open, that it is merely a social ritual that requires not a literal answer but a conventional answer. For example, the English greeting "How are you?" is not a question. It is the acknowledgment of one's existence as a social being. The rejoinder to the greeting "How are you?" is "Fine, thanks," *not* "My arthritis has been acting up lately and I've had a headache all morning."

Remember that when we converse, usually very little specific information is transmitted in the form of constatives, and English speakers are likely to speak indirectly. The form that a request may take, for example varies widely :

1. Need Statement : I need a match.
2. Imperative : Give me a match.
3. Embedded Imperative : Could you give me a match?
4. Permission Directive : May I have a match?
5. Question Directive : Do you have a match?
6. Hint : I don't have a match.

All of these mean "I request that you give me a match." The Hearer must make the inference from what the Speaker says.

The problem for the language learner is to become aware of the conditions or convention under which we interpret non-literal meaning (Grice, Gordon and Lakoff). For example, giving commands is considered rude by most people (sergeants excepted). We may give a command without saying that we are giving a command by questioning whether it is possible for the Hearer to do what we say, believing that the Hearer is able to do what we command. Instead of saying "I command you to wait outside!" we may say (Franz, p. 33) :

1. Would you mind waiting outside?
2. Can you wait outside?
3. Will you please wait outside?

In English-speaking culture there must be something very friendly about indirect requests, for children respond to indirect commands by obeying and also by speaking back in return more often they do to direct commands. For example, the indirect requests :

1. Would you mind passing the salt?
2. Is there salt on the table?

will invariably be met with the requested action and a comment in return (Shatz).
The response to #1 above is not :

Yes, I would mind.

The response to #2 above is not :

Yes (and no action).

Perhaps the conditions or conventions for interpreting indirect requests are universal. Perhaps not. I hope so because I would hate to think that language learners cannot get over the hurdle of literalness.

Paul Grice has proposed that there is a "cooperative principle" that informs the logic that allows us to infer what Speakers really mean. For instance, if you are at a party and your husband says to you, "That's your fourth bottle of beer", what does he mean? We must assume that the statement is relevant to something. Since the truth of the statement is obvious, there must be a point to it that is not the literal meaning. The statement must be relevant to some shared context. It would mean that you have drunk enough, or too much, or not enough. Who knows? The fact that the statement is relevant is what allows you to understand it.

There are four categories in Grice's Cooperative Principle. They are :

1. Quantity : Say just enough, not too much.
2. Quality : Try to make your contribution one that is true.
3. Relation : Be relevant.
4. Manner : Be perspicuous, orderly, brief, unambiguous, unobscure.

For example, if you are sitting in your car in a parking lot and you say to a passing pedestrian, "I'm out of gas," and he answers, "There's a garage just around the corner," there has been no violation of the Cooperative Principle, and so both you and the pedestrian understand what is meant.

A. I request that you give me information that will help me solve my problem. My problem is this. There is no more gasoline in the tank of my car. Without gasoline the car will not run. I want to drive the car away from this parking lot, but I cannot. I am frustrated by this situation.

B. I acknowledge and understand the situation that you are in. I suggest to you that gasoline is available for purchase at a nearby garage, which is located just around the corner, where you may go in order to obtain some.

Or words to this effect.

If, however, in a discourse one or more of these categories (Quantity, Quality, Relation, Manner) is violated, then it is necessary to infer the intended meaning from the context of utterance, instead of from the context of situation.

1. You are at a cocktail party, chatting with a good friend. Really you are gossiping about a mutual acquaintance.

A. "Mrs. Purvis is an old bag. The way she treats Anchalee..."

B. "The weather has been perfectly delightful this summer, hasn't it?"

Interpretation: Relation has been violated. The weather is not relevant to your comments about Mrs. Purvis' personality and behaviour. Therefore, your friend is insisting on changing the subject, and for some reason. Following your friend's eyes, you turn and see that Mrs. Purvis has just entered the room. Your friend was warning you.

2. You are conversing with a friend.

A. "Den doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days."

B. "He's being going to Bangkok every week-end."

Interpretation: There is no violation. Since B's comment is relevant, Den must have a girlfriend in Bangkok.

3. You are telling an acquaintance about a situation in which your colleague Teja has voted against your request for a salary increase. You say, "Teja is a fine friend."

Interpretation: Quality has been violated. This sort of statement is sometimes called *irony*. It is obviously not true that Teja is your friend. You know this because of his actions. Therefore you mean the opposite of what you say. You mean that he is your enemy.

4. You hear the words of a song: "You're the cream in my coffee. You're the spice in my stew..."

Interpretation: Quality has been violated. This sort of statement is sometimes called *metaphor*. Since people are not cream or spice, but cream in coffee and spice in stew are very good things to have, the *You* in the song must stand in relation to the singer as cream is to coffee and as spice is to stew.

5. At that same cocktail party you are talking about a mutual friend who always drinks too much on every social occasion. You say that at last week's dinner party, "He was a little intoxicated."

Interpretation: Quality has been violated. Since it is unlikely that your friend can drink only a little, you must mean that as usual he was very drunk. This sort of statement is sometimes called *meiosis*.

6. You are reading the Quotations of Chairman Mao: "To die for the Revolution is as heavy as Mt. Tai."

Interpretation: Quality again. What was written cannot be literally true. This sort of statement is called *hyperbole*. To die is not *heavy* in any objective sense. Heavy must stand in opposition to its complement *light* on a scale of values. You make an analogy with similar complementary terms such as *important* and *unimportant* or *selfless* and *selfish*, and you substitute an appropriate term to make a kind of sense out of the statement.

7. During the colonial wars a British General captured a region of Pakistan known as Sind. He sent a cable to the War Office in London consisting of one word: "Peccavi."

Interpretation: *Peccavi* doesn't seem to be an English word. In fact it isn't. Relation has been violated. *Peccavi* turns out to be the Latin for "I have sinned." Such a statement is sometimes called *ambiguity*. It seems irrelevant (even after it is translated) until the phonemic pun is understood.

8. You are reading a music review in the Bangkok Post: "During the recital Mrs. Purvis produced a series of sounds that were said by some members of the audience to correspond in an indirect fashion with what has been known to be the score of Stephen Foster's classic ballad "Home Sweet Home."

Interpretation: Manner has been violated. When a writer goes on at such great length to make obscure what ought to be a very simple point (Mrs. Purvis did not sing well) without actually writing down what he wants to mean, he wants the reader to make the correct inference. This is sometimes called *damning with faint praise*.

And so on.

How would you interpret the Englishman's statement, "Oh, he wouldn't know the difference. He's an American."?

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