

THE SEMANTIC- PRAGMATIC MEANING OF THE SENTENCE

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Abstract: This work is based on the linguistic distinction, especially, from semantic and pragmatic directions, and the application of the semantic- pragmatic distinctions.

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Even though in logic 'or' is usually represented only as inclusive disjunction (' \vee '), 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 (1) and (2), for example.

- (1) You can have coffee, tea, or milk.
- (2) Phaedo is in the den or the kitchen.

An utterance of (1) 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, p. 31). As for (2), 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 (2), the speaker is conversationally implicating that he doesn't know which room the dog is in. This implication 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.

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, pp. 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 the chair 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.

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 independently 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 propositional 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, p. 8). Economy and plausibility 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.

As illustrated by many of the examples above, the semantic-pragmatic distinction 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 unfamiliar with the pattern of use could still figure out what the speaker meant. This makes them standardized but not conventionalized.

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 Bo"r & 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 constructions, 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 particular words and particular kinds of constructions" (1974/1999, p. 48).

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