

ISSUES IN PRAGMATICS (PLIN 3001) 2006-07

LEXICAL PRAGMATICS

1. The issues

1. Introduction

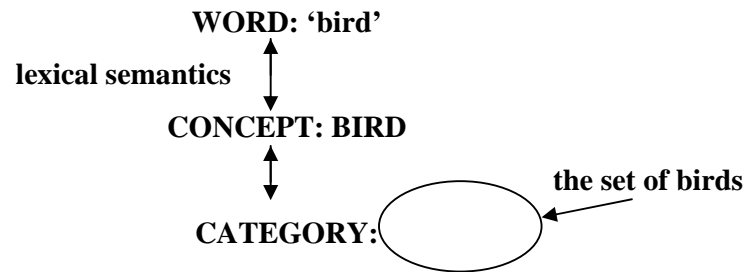
What I want to talk about this term is the fact that words are often used in ways that depart (sometimes a little, sometimes a lot) from their 'literal' meanings, the ones assigned them by the grammar. We invent new words, and people understand us. We blend two words together, and people understand us. We use nouns, adjectives or prepositions as verbs, and people understand us. We borrow words from other languages; we use words approximately, metaphorically or hyperbolically. As children or adults, we pick up the meanings of unfamiliar words without being taught, just by hearing them uttered in context. We see words come into fashion and vanish; we see them acquire new meanings and lose old ones. While sociolinguists, historical linguists, philosophers and psychologists have all been interested in different aspects of these phenomena, it's only in the last five years or so that pragmatists have begun to look systematically at how the semantics/pragmatics distinction applies at the level of the word, and to talk of a separate domain of 'lexical pragmatics' (see e.g. Carston 1997, 2002; Blutner 1998, 2002; Lascarides & Copestake 1998; Sperber & Wilson 1998, 2002; Wilson 2003). Broadly speaking, this is the domain I want to focus on this term.

I say 'broadly speaking' because the study of lexical pragmatics raises wider issues that I also want to look at: about lexical semantics, about the nature of concepts and their role in communication and cognition, about the acquisition of word meanings, about concept acquisition and innateness, about how word meanings are processed, about the development of lexical-pragmatic abilities and about how they break down (e.g. in autism or right hemisphere damage). Today, I'll illustrate some of the main types of lexical-pragmatic process discussed in the literature, and look at some of the broader issues we'll be thinking about this term.

2. The data for lexical pragmatics

Let's start by assuming a very simple model of lexical semantics (which we'll look at more closely next week). On this very simple model, words are treated as encoding concepts and concepts are treated as denoting categories of objects, events or properties in the world (or in alternative possible worlds):

Simple model of lexical semantics:

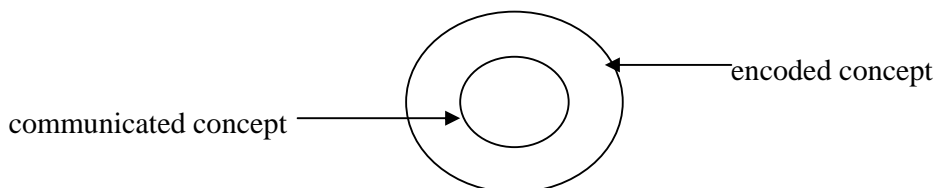


The goal of lexical semantics is to study the relation between words and the mentally-represented concepts they encode. If there were no such thing as pragmatics, a word would always be used to express exactly the concept it encodes, and would therefore pick out the same category of objects, events or properties on each occasion of use. However, as we've seen in Pragmatic Theory lectures, there is generally a gap between the sentence meaning assigned by the grammar and the speaker's meaning conveyed on a particular occasion of use. This is true not only at the level of whole utterances but also at the level of individual words. One way of putting the point is to say that there's a gap between the concept **encoded** by a word and the concept **communicated** (or **expressed**) by use of that word on a particular occasion. The gap between the concept encoded and the concept communicated by use of a word provides the basic data for lexical pragmatics, and the goal of lexical pragmatics is to explain how hearers bridge the gap.

The literature on lexical pragmatics distinguishes three main types of lexical-pragmatic process, corresponding to three main ways in which the concept communicated by use of a word may differ from the concept encoded. I'll call these **narrowing**, **approximation** and **metaphorical extension**.

(a) Lexical narrowing

Lexical narrowing is the case where a word is used in a more **specific** sense than the encoded one, resulting in a **narrowing** of the linguistically-specified denotation:



The effect of narrowing is to highlight a particular subpart of the linguistically-specified denotation. Here are some illustrations:

- (1) All doctors *drink*. ('drink liquid', 'drink alcohol', 'drink a lot of alcohol')
- (2) *red face, red eyes, red hair, red sunset, red apple, red stamp, red watermelon;*
- (3) *fast car, fast aeroplane, fast typist, fast food, fast road, fast landing.*
- (4) a. As I worked in the garden, a *bird* perched on my spade.
 b. *Birds* wheeled above the waves.
 c. A *bird*, high in the sky, invisible, sang its pure song.
 d. At Christmas, the *bird* was delicious.
 e. John opened the birdcage, and the *bird* flew across the room.
- (5) Mary is a *working mother*. (Lakoff: 'stereotypical working mother')
- (6) I have a *temperature*. ('higher than normal temperature')
- (7) I have to go to the bank.

In (1), *drink* might convey not the encoded sense 'drink liquid' but, more specifically, 'drink alcohol', or 'drink significant amounts of alcohol'. In (2), each use of *red* would pick out a slightly different colour, distributed over the object in a slightly different way (e.g. a red apple has red peel, a red watermelon has red flesh, etc.). In (3), the different uses of *fast* would indicate different speeds; in (4a-e), each use of *bird* would highlight a different subset of birds. As noted by Lakoff (1987:80-82), (5) would generally indicate not just that Mary satisfies the definition 'female parent who works', but that she is a stereotypical working mother, bringing up young children while working for money outside the home; and (6) would normally convey not the truism that the speaker has some temperature or other but that her temperature is high enough to be worth remarking on. Even an ordinary word like *bank* in (7), when disambiguated to mean 'financial institution', would probably then be narrowed further, to mean 'bank where ordinary people keep their money', or 'high-street bank'.

As illustrated by these examples, lexical narrowing is quite a flexible process: the encoded meaning may be narrowed to different degrees and in different directions, depending on the particular occasion of use. The central task for lexical pragmatics is to explain what triggers the narrowing process, what direction it takes, and when it stops. We might ask to what extent narrowing is universal. Should we expect to find the same words being narrowed in the same way in language after language, and if not, why not? For example, is there any language in which (8) could not be used to convey that Bill's uncle has a lot of money, and (9) could not be used to convey either that Jane's aunt has quite a good reputation or that she has quite a bad one?

- (8) Bill's uncle has *money*.

(9) Jane's aunt has quite a *reputation*.

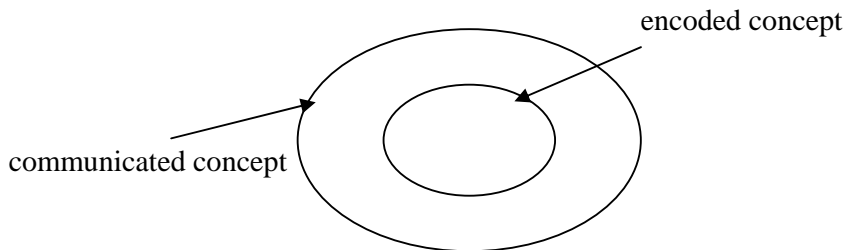
Why can *temperature* in (6) be used to mean 'higher than normal temperature', while *pulse* in (10) cannot be used to mean 'faster than normal pulse'?

(10) I have a *pulse*.

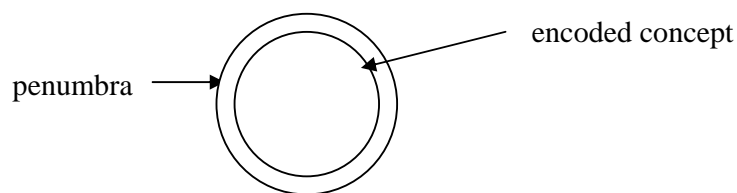
To the extent that narrowing is not universal, is it just arbitrary, or how can it be explained?

Lexical broadening

Approximation and metaphorical extension may both be seen as varieties of **broadening**, where a word is used to convey a more general sense than the encoded one, with consequent widening of the linguistically-specified denotation.



(b) Approximation is a minimal type of broadening: it involves the use of a word with a relatively strict sense to apply to a penumbra of cases (what Lasnik 1999 calls a 'pragmatic halo') that strictly speaking fall outside its linguistically-specified denotation:



Loose uses of round numbers, geometric terms and negatively-defined terms are good examples, as in (11)-(13), but there are other types of example, e.g. (14)-(15):

(11) This coat cost *1,000* dollars. ('about 1,000 dollars') (round numbers)

(12) The stones form a *circle, an oval, a pyramid*. ('approximately a circle') (geometric)

(13) This injection will be *painless*. ('nearly painless') (negatively defined terms)

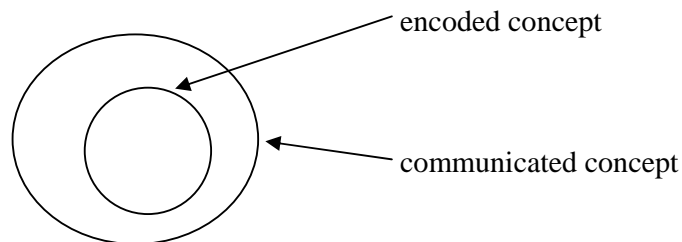
(14) This water is *boiling*. ('almost boiling') (scientific terms)

(15) Edinburgh is *north* of London. ('roughly north') (geographic terms)

(11)-(15) would be acceptable approximations when applied to objects that *almost* satisfied the strict definition, but not quite. As with narrowing (cf. (4) above), different degrees and types of approximation are appropriate in different circumstances; compare the interpretations of *flat* in (16a-e):

- (16) a. This ironing board is *flat*.
 b. My garden is *flat*.
 c. My neighbourhood is *flat*.
 d. My country is *flat*.
 e. The Earth is *flat*.

(c) **Hyperbole** may be seen as a more radical type of broadening, which allows the communicated concept to depart much further from the encoded concept:



For example, (17) would be an approximation if the water were almost boiling, and a hyperbole if the water was merely hotter than expected, or uncomfortably hot. Similarly, (18) would be an approximation if the speaker were on the point of fainting, and a hyperbole if she were simply very hungry:

(17) This water is *boiling*. ('hotter than expected/uncomfortably hot')

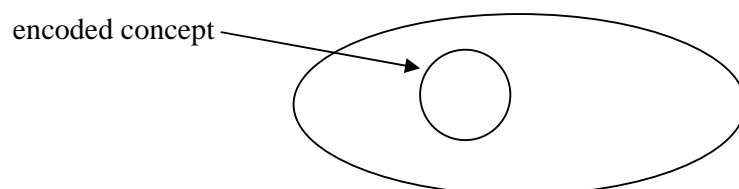
(18) I'm *fainting from hunger*. ('very hungry')

(d) **Metaphor** may be seen as a still more radical widening. Thus, what makes (19) a metaphor rather than an approximation is the fact that Mary falls very far outside the normal denotation of *rose*, *lily*, *daisy*, etc., and similarly for (20):

(19) Mary is *a rose, a lily, a daisy, a violet; a jewel, a diamond, a ruby, a pearl*.

(20) The leaves *danced* in the breeze.

(21) That book *puts me to sleep*. (literal? approximation? hyperbole? metaphor?)



communicated concept 

In fact, (21) has three possible interpretations apart from the strictly literal one: as an approximation ('the book puts me almost to sleep'), a hyperbole ('the book puts me in a state not too far removed from sleep') or a metaphor ('the book puts me in a state that has properties in common with sleep'). Thus, approximation, hyperbole and metaphor may all be seen as varieties of lexical broadening, involving different degrees of distance from the encoded 'literal' concept.

This intuitive idea is supported by a range of further data less often discussed than approximation, hyperbole and metaphor, which also seem to be varieties of broadening that fall somewhere between approximation, on the one hand, and hyperbole or metaphor on the other. One type of case has no generally accepted name: I'll call it **category extension**.

(e) **Category extension.** It's often been noticed that words like *Hoover*, which start out as names for a particular brand of item (e.g. vacuum cleaners) may end up being used to apply to the whole broader category. Thus, (22) might be understood as asking, not specifically for Kleenex, but for any brand of disposable tissue, and (23) might be understood as asking, not specifically for Sellotape, but for any brand of sticky tape:

(22) I have a cold. I need a *Kleenex*. ('disposable tissue')

(23) Have you any *Sellotape*? ('sticky tape')

I call this case category extension because the name of a salient category member is extended to apply to the whole broader category to which it belongs. This extension of brand names is something many companies resist: for example, a couple of years back there was a lawsuit by the internet search company Google, trying to ban use of the verb *google* to mean any type of internet search. It would be interesting to investigate this type of category extension in more detail. What are the linguistic and cognitive factors involved: for example, does it only take place when there is a single highly salient and easily processable brand name, and the name for the broader category (e.g. *sticky tape*, *vacuum cleaner*, *disposable tissue*) is linguistically complex? How long does it take before a word like *Hoover*, or *Kleenex*, or *Sellotape*, which clearly started out as the name of a specific brand, may be said to have acquired an extra encoded sense?

A similar range of examples involving broadening or category extension contains constructions like *the next X*, *the new Y*, etc. Here are some illustrations:

- (24) Roger Federer is the next *Sampras*. (used at Wimbledon 2003)
- (25) Iraq is this generation's *Vietnam*.
- (26) Handguns are the new *flick-knives*.
- (27) Brown is the new *black*. (statement in a fashion magazine)

And indeed, there's a current craze for utterances modelled on (27). *Private Eye* (the satirical magazine) has been collecting examples, which include:

- (28) Mint is the new *basil*.
- (29) Is oak the new *pine*?
- (30) Sunbeds are the new *cigarettes*.
- (31) Ironing is the new *yoga*.

Here, it's intuitively obvious (at least if one has enough knowledge of lifestyle journalism) roughly what these utterances are meant to convey. Notice that they can't be analysed as approximations: for instance, (24) is not claiming that Roger Federer is close enough to being Pete Sampras to be *called* Sampras. On the other hand, they don't seem to amount to hyperbole or metaphor either: for instance, (26) seems to be making something very close to a serious literal assertion. Examples like (22)-(31) might therefore be seen as filling the gap between approximations, at one extreme, and cases of full-fledged poetic metaphor, at the other.

Finally, there's a range of examples in which words are invented, blended or transferred from one syntactic category to another. In classical rhetoric, such cases are described as **catagchresis** when there is no existing word which has the concept in question as its literal sense, and as **metaphor** when an existing word could have been literally used. In other words, the borderline between metaphor and catagchresis depends on an accident of vocabulary, and it is reasonable to expect an account of lexical pragmatics to shed light on both. I'll call this category **neologisms**. Here are some illustrations:

(f) Neologisms. Experiments by Clark & Clark (1979) and Clark & Gerrig (1983) show that newly-coined verbs derived from nouns, as in (32)-(34), are no harder to understand than regular verbs:

(32) The newspaper boy *porched* the newspaper.

(33) They *Learjetted* off to Miami.

(34) He *Houdinied* his way out of the closet.

This suggests that lexical-pragmatic processes apply ‘on-line’ in a flexible, context-dependent way, creating novel verb senses from existing nouns (*porch*, *Learjet*, *Houdini*). Indeed, the borderline between familiar and unfamiliar words is unlikely to be drawn in the same place for all speakers of a language, or for the same speaker at different times: while some hearers may be able to retrieve a ready-made word sense, others may have to construct it on-line. Pragmatic inference continually makes up for gaps in the vocabulary, and this should be taken into account in an adequate theory of lexical pragmatics.

As with category extensions like *Hoover* or *Kleenex*, neologisms which start out as one-off creative uses may become established in a community and eventually be seen as part of the language. According to Dickson (1988), words like *nerd*, *humungous* and *faff about* all started out in this way. Words like *smog* are supposed to have arisen by blending the meanings of the words *smoke* and *fog*, and some approaches to metaphor (e.g. Fauconnier & Turner 2002) treat metaphors as a type of meaning blend. There’s a website on neologisms (www.wordspy.com) which documents many examples.

3. Issues

(a) Pragmatic issues. As these examples show, lexical-pragmatic processes such as narrowing, approximation and metaphorical extension seem to apply spontaneously, unconsciously and automatically to fine-tune the interpretation of virtually every word. As I noted at the beginning of this lecture, if there were no pragmatic processes, and words always communicated the concepts they encode, hearers would have little difficulty understanding what the speaker is trying to convey. The more the communicated concept can depart from the encoded concept, the harder it should be for speakers and hearers to co-ordinate their understandings. The central goal of lexical-pragmatics is to explain how this coordination is achieved, by showing what triggers lexical-pragmatic processes, what direction they take, and when they stop.

One question I want to consider is whether there are distinct theoretical categories such as approximation, hyperbole and metaphor, which we can isolate from each other and define. Most writings on lexical pragmatics take such categories for granted and aren’t even looking

for a unified account. Thus, the people who work on metaphor rarely consider approximation, narrowing, or even hyperbole; the people who work on approximation don't look at narrowing or metaphor, the people who work on narrowing don't look at broadening, and their accounts are rarely generalisable beyond their own particular range of examples. In relevance theory, we've been arguing for a long time that there's no clear cut-off point between the different varieties of broadening (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1986). More recently (and thanks particularly to Robyn Carston's work) we've been trying to provide a unified account of both narrowing and broadening (e.g. Carston 1997, 2002, Sperber & Wilson 1998, 2002; Wilson 2003). It would be good to look seriously at the possibilities of developing such an account (and at possible objections to this approach).

(b) Semantic issues. Clearly, to provide an account of lexical pragmatics, we have to make some assumptions about what types of semantic analysis provide the best starting point. For example, lexical-pragmatic processes may lead to semantic change, and it may have occurred to you that some of the examples we've looked at today (e.g. *drink*) have acquired an extra sense, and are now ambiguous. This is a **descriptive** question about the semantic analysis of particular words. A more general **theoretical** question is what semantic representations look like in general, and about the nature of concepts themselves. I'll discuss this issue next week.

(c) Prototypes and the encyclopaedia. In fact, the best currently available approach to semantics (Fodor's – which looks like the very simple model of semantics I used at the beginning of the lecture) raises a mass of further questions about the acquisition of concepts and their role in cognition and categorisation, which I'll look at in lecture 3 (on experimental issues) and lecture 4 (on philosophical issues).

(d) Metaphysical and cognitive functions of concepts: Here, I'll be mainly concerned with the relation between concepts and the objects, events and properties in the world that they categorise. Fodor takes an **extensional** approach to semantics, which claims that the content of a concept depends on its denotation, i.e. the category of objects/events/properties it denotes. We'll look at this in more detail in lecture 4.

(e) Innateness and acquisition: Fodor's approach to semantics also has dramatic implications for innateness and acquisition, which we'll look at in more detail in lecture 5, before returning to lexical pragmatics proper in the second half of term.

(g) Development and breakdown of lexical-pragmatic abilities: How do lexical-pragmatic abilities develop in normal conditions, and how do they break down, e.g. in autism (Happé 1993) or right hemisphere damage (Langdon, Davies & Coltheart 2002)? Here, a lot of work

has been done on development and breakdown of metaphor, but virtually nothing on narrowing, approximation or the other varieties of category extension. Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that they break down in the same way as metaphor. Here are two examples from someone with Asperger's syndrome, the first an illustration of how narrowing breaks down, and the second an illustration of failure to deal with approximation:

If [my husband] were to tell me he was disappointed he had missed me at lunch, I would wonder if he meant to say he was sad – which is simply regretfully sorry; unhappy – which is somewhere between mad and sad; disheartened – which is a lonely sad; mad – which makes you want to argue with someone over what they had done; angry – which makes you want to ignore the person you are feeling this way towards; furious – which makes you want to spit; or none of the above. In order for me really to understand what people are saying I need much more than a few words mechanically placed together. (Willey 1999, 63)

[During my first year at school], we were required to take naps each day. I vividly remember my teacher announcing, "Children, find your mats and take your nap." I refused. Again the teacher called my parents. Again my parents made their way to the school.

"Liane, why won't you take your nap?" my parents wondered of me.

"Because I can't."

"You see!" the teacher said smugly.

"Why can't you take your nap?" my parents continued.

"Because I don't have a mat."

"You most certainly do have a mat. There it is in your cubby," the teacher replied.

"I do not have a mat."

"You see what I mean?" the teacher asked my parents. "She is an obstinate child."

"Why do you say you don't have a mat?" the folks asked, not giving up on me.

"That is not a mat. That is a rug," I honestly and accurately replied.

"So it is," said my father. "Will you take a nap on your rug?"

"If she asks me to," I said matter-of-factly ...

I wasn't trying to be difficult, I was trying to do the right thing. The trouble was, the teacher assumed I understood language like other children. I did not. (Willey 1999: 19-20).

If lexical-pragmatic failures are quite general in autism, Asperger's syndrome and stroke damage, we need a detailed explanation of why this is so.

Homework

1. Draw diagrams based on those in the lecture to show how *genius* in (i) might be understood as (a) an approximation and (b) a hyperbole. Could the ironical interpretation be diagrammed in the same way (as a case of either broadening or narrowing)? If so, how? (If not, this suggests that there are further lexical-pragmatic processes than the ones we've looked at today.)

(i) John is a *genius*.

2. Think of some more examples of each of the types of lexical-pragmatic process illustrated in the lecture (narrowing, approximation, metaphor, hyperbole, neologism, category extension).

3. Do you think *bald* should be strictly defined (as meaning 'hairless') and treated as an approximation when applied to someone with very little hair? What arguments might someone use for or against this view?

Reading

Carston, R. 1997. Enrichment and loosening: complementary processes in deriving the proposition expressed? *Linguistische Berichte* 8:1 03-127. (dept file & Robyn's home page)

Wilson, D. 2003. Relevance and lexical pragmatics. *Italian Journal of Linguistics/Rivista di Linguistica* 15.2: 273-291. (dept file, my home page and lexical pragmatics website).

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