# 24.903 Week #7 – 2022-03-14 + 2022-03-16

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## 1 Another dimension of meaning?

We now have seen three dimensions of meaning:

- encoded truth-conditions

- presuppositions

- implicatures

But that's not all. There might be at least one more dimension: *expressive* meaning.[1] This concerns a kind of meaning that has long (Bühler 1934, Jakobson 1960) been distinguished from the *descriptive* function of language that we have mostly been concerned with so far:[2]

- *descriptive* function: the relation of the linguistic sign to objects or state of affairs in the extra-linguistic world

- *expressive* function: the relation between the utterer and the sign what it conveys about them

Note that sometimes the very same fact can be conveyed descriptively or expressively (using examples from the pioneering, but so far unpublished, manuscript Kaplan 1999):

(1)   a.   I am in pain.

      b.   I witnessed a minor mishap.

(2)   a.   Ouch!

      b.   Oops!

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1 Two useful overviews: Potts 2012, McCready 2020.

2 I'm following the discussion in Gutzmann 2019.

Some interjections show interesting interactions with other material. The following is ambiguous (intonation can disambiguate):

(3)   a.   Man, it's hot!                    It's remarkable that it is hot.

      b.   Man it's hot!                     It's remarkably hot.

See McCready 2008.

Interjections like *ouch* and *oops* are obvious examples of items whose meaning is expressive, but there are plenty of other kinds of expressive meanings discussed in the literature.

A recent addition are emoji (Grosz et al. 2022):

(4)   How are you doing? 😕

Commonly discussed are certain "emotive"/"expletive" adjectives:

(5)   Lize bought a frakkin' Porsche.

What is being communicated by (5):

- the claim that Lize bought a Porsche

- that the utterer has a strong (negative?) emotion towards … Porsches?

The adjectives can take much broader scope than one would expect from their surface position:

(6)   The dog peed on the damn couch.

Other examples of expressive expressions:

- epithets: *that nitwit Gregson*

- slurs: *dog* vs *cur*, *German* vs *boche/Kraut*

Honorific marking, for example in Thai (from McCready 2019: p.126):

(7)   a.   (A young man is expressing admiration to an author.)
           phǒm chɔ̂ɔp naŋsǔu khun    {√kháp/#∅}
           I.high like   book   you.high pol.pt/∅

           'I like your book' + (polite/unspecified)

b. (A young man is expressing admiration for his friend's new book.)
kuu  chɔ̂ɔp  naŋsŭu  mɯɯŋ    {#kháp/√∅}
I.low  like    book      you.low  pol.pt/∅

'I like your book' + (polite/unspecifed)

## 2 The formal nature of expressive meanings

The expressive meaning is not part of the truth-conditions:

(8)  a.  That's not true! She bought a Ferrari.

  b.  #That's not true! Porsches are perfectly normal.

It's sometimes a bit hard to formulate the appropriate test since it's often not so transparent what exactly the expressive meaning is. This has been called the *ineffability* of expressive meanings, but in the end, it's just a matter of degree: it's also hard to define what a chair is (see the first chapter of Elbourne 2011).

Kaplan: *Goodbye!* doesn't have truth-conditions at all. "Instead, I ask 'What are the conditions under which the expression is *correctly* or *accurately* used?'".

Are expressive meanings presuppositions? This is very delicate. Some people believe so (for example Schlenker 2007, Marques & García-Carpintero 2020). Others do not (such as Potts and McCready, referenced above).

At least some examples pass the HWAMIDK test:

(9)  Hey wait a minute, I didn't know that there was something wrong with Porsches.

The family of sentences test also seems to work:

(10)  a.  Did that nitwit Gregson break the machine?

  b.  If that nitwit Gregson broke the machine, I will report him.

  c.  Maybe that nitwit Gregson broke the machine.

However, there are experiments that distinguish (some) presuppositions from (some) expressive meanings:

(11)  a.  If somebody stole my car, it was Gregson who did it.

b. ??If Germans are despiccable, Gregson is a Kraut.

The most common formal approach to expressive meanings is *two-dimensional*. Gutzmann 2019: p.83 introduces an evocative notation for the expressive component of meaning that uses emoji in the (informal) meta-language:

(12)  $\llbracket$The damn dog barked the whole night$\rrbracket = \dfrac{\text{☹(the dog)}}{\text{the dog barked the whole night}}$

Two-dimensional formal systems were developed by Potts 2005 primarily for another phenomenon: appositives and parentheticals. These have descriptive meanings but ones that are also "not-at-issue":

(13)  a.  Ames, (who was) a successful spy, is now behind bars.

b.  Ames was, as the press reported, a successful spy.

## 2.1  The normative force of some expressives

An utterer who uses a derogatory term like *Kraut* is not just expressing that they despise the referent (for their being German), they signal that this attitude is the right attitude.

## 2.2  The surprising force of some expressives

Even *mentioning* derogatory terms brings with it a feeling of derogation:

(14)  It's not OK to call Germans *Krauts*.

(Which is why we've been using this rather antiquated derogatory term for a group that is not currently in any important sense oppressed.)

## 3  Pronouns

What does honorific marking contribute? A signal that, for example, it is appropriate for the utterer to hold the addressee in esteem. Is it a presupposition? Again, it may well be:

(15)  Hey wait a minute, I didn't know/think we're on such formal terms.

(16)    a.    If "vous" are hungry, we could eat at this bistro.

        b.    Are "vous" hungry?

Or, it might be a second-dimension meaning. We won't be able to settle this here.

It's pretty clear that anybody would recognize that honorific systems mark distinctions that are culturally established: appropriate interpersonal attitudes. What exactly the attitudes expressed are is context-dependent and subject to change. Conrod 2020:

> Brown & Gilman 1960 analyzed this alternation across Italian, French, Latin, Spanish, and English, generalizing the forms into "T" forms (such as thou and tu) and "V" forms (such as you and Vous). Historically, the social dimension along which the T/V distinction was decided was power — as in relationships of employment or nobility. However, over time and in some social contexts the T/V alternation gained another social dimension, which was social closeness or solidarity — friends who wanted to signal familiarity could use the T form to accomplish this (without implying a power differential). Raymond 2016 examined the T/V alternation in contemporary Spanish in several settings, and highlighted not only instances of speakers invoking the dimensions of power and solidarity through their use of T/V forms, but also instances of speakers alternating these forms mid-conversation to accomplish pragmatic goals. By momentarily invoking either authority or familiarity, speakers could use pronouns to demonstrate af fect (friendly, angry, contrite) in a way that was complementary with the content of the conversation itself.

> Because these pronouns are pragmatically interpreted (i.e., not based on absolute semantic values), the sociopragmatic meaning of any honorific or (in)formal pronoun is highly context dependent. This context includes not only the social relationship between the speaker and addressee, but also cultural contexts — for example, Rusty Barrett (p.c.) notes that there are interlocutors for whom he would use the formal form when speaking Ki'che' Maya, but the informal form when speaking

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Spanish. These contextual dependencies further demonstrate the flexibility and relativity by which pronouns gain their social meaning.

We then turned to considering English third person pronouns and the so-called gender marking on them.[3] We again should not be tempted into thinking that language is immutable and given to us from up high.

- yes, English has had a rigid morphosyntactic organization of the pronoun system that marks a certain binary distinction in the third person pronoun paradigm (maybe we should call this: m-series/f-series)

- yes, "pronouns are functional elements—meaning they are resistant to change, and it is unusual for languages to develop new pronouns over short periods of time" (Conrod 2020)

- but even such paradigms are subject to linguistic change: the use of singular *they* is on the rise (see Bjorkman 2017 for an analysis)

- it is not grammatically given that the distinction maps onto any other distinction in the language

- man/woman, male/female are lexical pairs and it is not given that the pronoun categories map onto those pairs

- as society changes, language change is concomitant

- how will language change if the previously assumed sharp lines in the area of sex(uality)/gender are redrawn or dissolved? what happens to other lexical areas, such as kinship terminology: mother/father, sister/brother, aunt/uncle? (NB: *cousin* is the only common English kinship term that is not gendered)

McConnell-Ginet 2018:

Most people like to think of language as just "there," as neutral. They do not enjoy being reminded that some familiar linguistic practices are unsustainable as social practices become more sensitive to the interests of those outside standard gender/sexual binaries. [...]

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3 See Conrod 2020, 2021, McConnell-Ginet 2018.

Linguistic practice involves not only explicit meaning but also what is conveyed implicitly by discursive norms not to say "what goes without saying" but also to "specify what needs to be specified." Discursive norms operative in most contexts where English is being used take for granted a sharp, exhaustive, and stable binary gender/sex classification. Many content words seem to presuppose this split (kinship terms, for example), but third-person singular pronouns bring out quite compellingly the pervasiveness of presuppositions that people are readily sorted into two sex/gender categories and that, once sorted, they remain in their categories.

It is hardly surprising, then, that many people resist moving away from familiar gender/ sex binaries. There is a long tradition of ceding what I call *semantic authority* to "experts." In many cases — like whether a tree is properly labeled beech or elm — this seems relatively unproblematic. But when the question is whether a person should go into the toilet facilities labeled *Women* or *Men*, who is to be accorded semantic authority is far more complicated. The critical point is that meaning is deeply intertwined in power relations and structures.

What is the formal semanticist to do?

(17)   $\llbracket \text{he}_i \rrbracket^{c,w} = c_g(i)$,
where $c_g$ is the contextually salient assignment function and it is appropriate in $c$ to use m-series pronouns for $c_g(i)$

Expert opinion: as linguists we're not experts on how people should use, shape, and change their language. That's for users to work out. What we do is describe what the language is.

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