

## 16 Meaning in interaction

My final example of deliberate ambiguity is taken from *The Money Programme*.<sup>33</sup> Once again the hearer cannot fully understand the speaker's intention without **simultaneously** entertaining the two meanings of the word *bank*.

### Example 21

*The speaker is referring to the Swiss city of Geneva:*

'It's a city where "The banks along the river" has a different meaning from usual.'

## 1.4 Utterance meaning: the first level of speaker meaning

When in interaction we have resolved all the ambiguities of sense, reference and structure — when we have moved from abstract meaning (what a particular sentence could mean in theory) to what the speaker actually does mean by these words on this particular occasion — we have arrived at **contextual meaning** or **utterance meaning**.<sup>34</sup> Utterance meaning can be defined as 'a sentence-context pairing' (Gazdar 1979) and is the first component of **speaker meaning**.

### 1.4.1 Importance of utterance meaning

Now, you may feel, and with some justification, that (except, of course, for story book detectives deciphering baffling clues!) in everyday interaction people do not normally go around straining their interpretative faculties trying to determine sense and reference. Although it is certainly the case that the majority of sentences, taken out of context, are, at least from the point of view of the hearer,<sup>35</sup> potentially multiply ambiguous, in real life we rarely have difficulty in interpreting them correctly in context. In fact, more often than not, we fail to notice ambiguities of sense and reference at all, unless some misunderstanding occurs or unless, as in jokes or word-play, our attention is deliberately drawn to their existence.

But, as we have already seen with the example of the Demjanjuk trial, problems really do occur in assigning sense and reference and there are cases where correctly assigning sense and reference can, quite literally, be a matter of life and death. An example of this can be found in the transcript of a controversial English murder trial, which was held in 1952. A youth of

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nineteen, Derek Bentley, was charged jointly with a sixteen-year-old, Christopher Craig, with having committed the then capital offence of murdering a police officer. It was never disputed that it was Craig who fired the fatal shot; Bentley was unarmed and had, in fact, already been caught and was being restrained by a policeman at the time the shot was fired. The case against Bentley hinged on the allegation that he had shouted, *Let him have it, Chris! Shoot the policeman*, which in turn was construed as 'deliberate incitement to murder'. An alternative interpretation proposed later in Bentley's defence<sup>36</sup> was that it referred to *the gun*, *him* referred to *the police officer* and that far from telling Craig to shoot his pursuer, Bentley was recommending Craig to hand over the gun. This second interpretation was rejected by the court and Bentley was found guilty and hanged. Craig, who had actually fired the shot, was still a minor and was sentenced only to youth custody.<sup>37</sup>

It is generally true that law courts (at least in Britain) exhibit an extreme reluctance to take account of anything other than the dictionary meaning of particular expressions. A particular source of irritation to me is the use of so-called 'expert witnesses' in legal cases involving the use of obscene or abusive (often racist) language. In such cases the defence invariably bring in to court some cobbwebby philologist who will testify, for example, that to shout *Bollocks!* is not offensive because it 'means' *little balls*.<sup>38</sup> It seems that the only linguistic evidence admissible in these cases is the etymology of a word or phrase (and frequently the 'etymology' is wholly spurious) — no account is taken of the circumstances in which the word is used nor of the speaker's intention in uttering it. In another court case,<sup>39</sup> the defendant was charged with four offences against the owner of a Chinese restaurant. One was that he had called the restaurant owner a *Chinky bastard*, but this charge was dismissed because an 'expert' testified that the expression 'meant' '*wandering parentless child travelling through the countryside in the Ching Dynasty*' and was in no way offensive.<sup>40</sup> Courts seem incapable of taking on board the fact that the original lexical meaning of an expression is not a good guide to the speaker's intention in employing that expression.



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### 1.5 Force: the second level of speaker meaning

In the previous section we saw that there was a crucial dispute about the meaning of Bentley's words (utterance meaning). More importantly, however, there was a disagreement about Bentley's **intention** in making the alleged utterance: was Bentley urging Craig to commit murder or recommending him to surrender? The psychologist, Miller, writing in 1974, was one of the first people to point out the significance of this level of analysis:

Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or parse their sentences or understand their words ... A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we often fail to understand a speaker's intention.

In pragmatics we use the term **force** to refer to the speaker's communicative intention. Force, a concept introduced by the philosopher, J. L. Austin, is the second component of speaker meaning. Imagine someone says to you: *Is that your car?* And suppose further that because of the context in which the question is asked, there are no ambiguities of sense or reference, that the word *that* indicates a unique entity (your car) and *your* refers to you. So, although you have no problem in understanding the utterance meaning (the first level of speaker meaning), yet still you might not understand the force behind the question. Is the speaker expressing admiration or expressing scorn? Is it a complaint that your car is blocking the drive? Is the speaker requesting a lift into town? These are all examples of the different pragmatic forces which the same utterance might have.

In the sections which follow we shall examine how utterance meaning and force, the two components of speaker meaning, interrelate. There are four possible permutations in understanding utterance meaning and force, which we shall explore in sections 1.5.1–1.5.4.

#### 1.5.1 Understanding both utterance meaning and force

To understand both utterance meaning and force is probably the most common state of affairs. This was illustrated in example 1. Although the sentence *What's wrong with the cat?* was ambiguous, in practice the hearers had no problem whatever in understanding what the speaker meant. The *cat* in question was the *cat-o'*

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*nine-tails* and the speaker's intention was to advocate the reintroduction of corporal punishment as a legal sanction.

### 1.5.2 Understanding utterance meaning but not force

Probably the second most common situation is when we understand the meaning of a speaker's utterance, but not the force. This was illustrated well in an article about Barry Manilow.<sup>41</sup> The writer was discussing the singer's feelings of insecurity:

#### Example 22

He suspects compliments. He sifts them for snide subtext. Conditioning has taught him this. Bob Dylan stopped him at a party, embraced him warmly, told him: 'Don't stop doing what you're doing, man. We're all inspired by you.' He knew not what to make of the encounter. Nearly two years later, it haunts him still.

'Who knows?' he says, shrugging the shrug of one who has shrugged much. 'It seems so odd that Bob Dylan would tell me this. I wasn't exactly sure what he meant. He may have been laughing out of the other side of his mouth while he said it, but it didn't seem like it. I mean, he looked me dead in the eye. But maybe he says that to everybody who walks by. He may have had one drink too many. You know, people give me jabs all the time — but not to my face ... I sort of left the party for a minute because I wasn't sure, I thought, "Well, maybe ..."'

It was not the meaning of the utterance *Don't stop doing what you're doing* which caused Manilow problems, but what Dylan **meant** by those words. Was he being sarcastic, sincere, flattering Manilow? As Miller pointed out, it is this level of communication which is often so difficult to understand.

### 1.5.3 Understanding force but not utterance meaning

To understand the force of what is said without understanding the meaning of that utterance is rather more unusual, but it does happen. In example 8, we saw that although Alan fails to understand the exact meaning of the word *chased*, yet he understands the force of his girlfriend's utterance — she is **praising** her father. Here are two further examples, the first was said to me the

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first day I arrived in Australia by a man who had taken me to the University restaurant. The second I heard in the United States, and was spoken by one teenager to her friend, who was getting into a panic:

### Example 23

It's my shout.

### Example 24

Don't have a cow!

I had never encountered either of these idioms, but in each case the context and circumstances were such that the intended force was perfectly clear.<sup>42</sup> The first meant *It's my treat* or *I'll pay* and clearly had the force of an offer; the second in British English would be something like *Keep your hair on!* and constituted a piece of advice.

## 1.5.4 Understanding neither utterance meaning nor force

A hearer who fails to establish the utterance meaning correctly or at all may fail to understand the force the speaker intended. I was once at a conference in Greece and a group of British and American linguists were discussing another linguist, who was not present. Speaker A (British) said:

### Example 25

'Her work has become very popular.'

I already knew what he thought of the book in question, and correctly interpreted *popular* as meaning *non-academic*. I therefore correctly interpreted the intended force of the utterance as criticism. The Americans agreed that it was indeed popular, but they interpreted *popular* as meaning *well-received/having a lot of success*. They therefore incorrectly interpreted the intended force of the utterance as praise.

Again in the United States I overheard one woman say to another:

### Example 26

'He says now I'm well down my personal corridor.'

I had no idea what was meant by *personal corridor* and, since

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I didn't know whether being well down it was a good or a bad thing, I was completely unable to assign force to this utterance.

## 1.5.5 Interrelationship of utterance meaning and force

We have seen, then, that there are two components of **speaker meaning** — utterance meaning and force. It is frequently (but not invariably) the case that we derive force from utterance meaning but we can, for example, use paralinguistic features (such as intonation and tone of voice) or non-linguistic features (such as gesture) in order to work out the intended force. Or we may (as in example 8) rely mainly or entirely on context. On the other hand, if (as in example 25) we fail to understand the utterance meaning, we may well fail to understand the force or if (as the Bentley example on page 18 illustrated), we cannot agree on utterance meaning, we are unlikely to be able to agree as to the intended force. From this we can see that the two components of speaker meaning are closely related, but not inseparable and it would be a mistake to conflate or confuse them. It is precisely this mistake which I criticized in section 1.2.

## 1.6 Definitions of pragmatics (revisited)

It is extremely easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to pick holes in earlier approaches to the study of pragmatics. In the discussion which follows it is important to bear in mind that the 'pioneers' in the area of pragmatics were reacting against an approach to linguistics which was strongly biased towards meaning in abstract rather than meaning in use.<sup>43</sup> But disciplines evolve and our definitions, theories and methodologies must also change in order to respond to new concerns and insights.

### 1.6.1 Speaker meaning

In section 1.2 I criticized the fact that the term 'speaker meaning' obscures the fact that there are two aspects or levels of speaker meaning — utterance meaning and force. There are two reasons why writers who, explicitly or implicitly, have used this definition have not needed or wanted to make the distinction. In the first place (reasonably enough, given the approach to linguistics they were reacting against), this group of writers was really only interested in the second level — force — and in the factors

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(particularly the social factors) which lead a speaker to formulate an utterance in a particular way. For example, they were interested in **why** a speaker might use an indirect rather than direct form of request, complaint, criticism, etc. In the second place — and this now seems a rather serious weakness in their approach — this group of writers was concerned primarily or exclusively with **speaker intention** and focused on the speaker or producer of talk to the near exclusion of the hearer or receiver of talk. It must be obvious that **for the speaker** ambiguities of sense, reference or structure rarely, if ever, exist. For example, the person who wrote the *out of order* sign which I found knew exactly what was meant. For him or her there was no ambiguity; the ambiguity only existed for me, the reader.

### 1.6.2 Utterance interpretation

In contrast, the broadly cognitive approach claimed by those who operate the *utterance interpretation* definition of pragmatics focuses almost exclusively on the process of interpretation from the point of view of the **hearer**. This approach does seem potentially to offer a rather good account of disambiguation at level one. But their focus on the way in which hearers reach a particular interpretation is accompanied by a refusal to take account of the social constraints on utterance production, and it is this which severely limits the explanatory power of their account at level two. It is clearly more difficult to interpret the force of a person's utterance, if you are not interested in **why** he or she is speaking in a particular way.

### 1.6.3 Pragmatics: meaning in interaction

In this book I shall be working towards a definition of pragmatics as *meaning in interaction*. This reflects the view that meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance.

I was recently doing some examining at another university. Members of staff from several different departments were gathering for the meeting when one, greeting someone he hadn't seen for some time, said: *How are things, Scott?* Now the **meaning**

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**potential** of this utterance was not unlimited. For example, the words themselves could not reasonably have been interpreted as an invitation to dinner, or a request to feed the goldfish or as a proposal of marriage. And in the particular **context** of an examiners' meeting, with its clear social constraints on the sorts of questions that could appropriately be asked, it would not have been reasonable for Scott to have interpreted the question as a request to expatiate about his private life, bodily functions, etc. (note that these would have been perfectly reasonable interpretations of the same utterance at a counselling session or at a doctor's surgery). But even when these interpretations had been excluded, there still remained a range of perfectly reasonable interpretations. The hearer could have chosen to take it as a purely phatic greeting, or as a question about how he liked his new job, an expression of anxiety about a particular student, etc. In fact he chose to say: *I've sold the house*, and the two of them discussed property in the area for a while. From the range of possible utterance meanings and speaker meanings the hearer developed a topic which was appropriate to the circumstances and (in this instance) congenial to both participants. And this is a fairly typical state of affairs. As we shall see in the chapter which follows, it is comparatively rare for a speaker to formulate an utterance so that the hearer has absolutely no room for manoeuvre.

### 1.7 Summary

In this chapter we have discussed the relative strengths and weaknesses of different definitions of pragmatics (and the underlying assumptions which these definitions presuppose). I shall be referring to these approaches very frequently as I review the development of pragmatics in the remaining chapters of this book, but by the end of the book I shall present a view of pragmatics as *meaning in interaction*, since this takes account of the different contributions of both speaker and hearer as well as that of utterance and context to the making of meaning.

#### Notes

1. See, for example, the work of G. Fauconnier (1985).