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Institutt for litteratur, områdestudier og europeiske språk

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ENG2157 – Semantics and Pragmatics

Part I carries 20% of the overall mark.

QUESTION 1

Discuss briefly ANY THREE of the following topics. Give English examples to illustrate your discussion.

i. homonymy and polysemy

When there are **two** different words with the same form, they are **homonyms**: e.g. *bat* [rodent] and *bat* [sports equipment] These are both homophones (same phon. form), and homographs (same orthographic form), but there are cases of each of these without the other: *their/there*; *sow*[noun]/*sow*[verb].

Not all cases where there is more than one sense for one form are homonyms. There are also polysemic words, where there is one word with two or more senses: e.g. *neck* [of a person/bottle], *book* [object/contents]. Polysemy can also go across word classes: e.g. *book* is *also* a verb with a related sense.

There are at least two different criteria for relatedness of senses: synchronic and diachronic. Which is used will affect whether we categorise as homonyms or polysemes.

ii. entailment

It's a relation between propositions (or statements)

Proposition A entails proposition B if and only if the truth of proposition A is sufficient for the truth of proposition B

Or: Proposition A entails proposition B if and only if there are no circumstances in which proposition A is true in which proposition B is not true.

Or equivalent.

It can depend on logical words, or on lexical words. Students might give examples.

They might also discuss mutual entailment.

iii. spatial deixis

Deixis is a term for linguistic items that encode sensitivity to the act of speaking (or writing) and therefore the context of utterance, and for uses of linguistic items that involve this kind of sensitivity.

Several kinds of deixis can be distinguished on the basis of which features of context are encoded, including person deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis.

Spatial deixis (also known as space or place deixis) is encoded by adverbs ('here', 'there') demonstratives and demonstrative phrases (e.g. 'this', 'that', 'this dog', 'that cat'), certain adjectives

(e.g. 'local', 'nearby') particles ('away', 'hither') and verbs (e.g. 'come', 'go'), as well as phrases such as 'on the right of', 'in front of'.

(1) here, there, this, that, this X, that X, local, nearby, away, hither, come, go, on the right of, in front of

It is usual to understand deixis in terms of deictic centres. The most important one for spatial deixis is the location of the speaker.

(2) It's too hot here in the sun. Let's take our drinks into the shade over there.

If the speaker moves, the location that 'here' refers to moves too.

(3) I'm glad we moved here. I was melting in the sun over there.

A secondary centre is the location of the addressee.

Different languages encode different distinctions in spatial deixis. The English demonstratives and locatives form a two-term system, with one or two centres: 'here', 'this', 'this X' are said to be proximal (at or near to the speaker), while 'there', 'that', 'that X' are said to be distal (i.e. further away from the speaker-centre), but can be addressee-proximal (i.e. near the second centre).

(4) here, this, this X [proximal]

(5) there, that, that X [distal/addressee-proximal]

Other languages have systems with three terms or even more, as there used to be in English (and still is in Scots): yonder contrasting with this and that.

iv. antonymy (binary and gradable)

antonymy is a word for 'having opposite meanings'. There are two types:

1) binary antonyms

Opposites like *dead/alive*, *pass/fail* where the properties exclude each other – nothing is both dead and alive – and the negation of one entails the other: *X is not alive* entails *X is dead*.

2) gradable antonyms

Opposites like *hot/cold*, where the properties exclude each other – nothing is both hot and cold – but the negation of one does not entail the other: *X is not hot* does not entail *X is cold*, since there are intermediate temperatures.

v. Face Threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory postulates that politeness in language use is governed by the need to preserve 'face'. Face is defined as the public self-image that every (adult) person wants to claim for him/herself as a member of society.

Brown and Levinson divide it into negative and positive aspects.

Negative face is related to the desire to be free to pursue one's goals; positive face to the desire to be liked.

More specifically, negative face is defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61)

And positive face is defined as "the positive consistent self image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (Brown & Levinson, 2006: 311)

They postulate that many actions have the potential to damage face: 'Face-Threatening Acts' (FTAs).

Attempts at politeness can be understood as attempts to avoid damaging someone's face when the situation requires the speaker to perform an FTA.

Face-threatening acts can threaten positive face or negative face or both.

Acts that threaten the addressee's negative face:

requests, suggestions, advice, reminders,

threats, warnings

but also

offers (since they may put pressure on the hearer to accept, and perhaps to incur a debt)

and

compliments or expressions of envy directed at the hearer's belongings

Acts that threaten the hearer's positive face:

expressions of disapproval of the hearer

disagreement with the speaker

mention of taboo topics

non-cooperation in an activity

and more.

There are also acts that threaten the speaker's face.

Acts that threaten the speaker's negative face:

expressing thanks,

making a promise

and more

Acts that threaten the speaker's positive face:

apologies,

confessions

accepting a compliment

and perhaps more.

Speakers aim to preserve the positive and negative face of themselves and their addressee, either by avoiding FTAs or by adopting certain strategies.

vi. the Language of Thought hypothesis

The philosopher Jerry Fodor has argued that we think in a 'language of thought', distinct from natural languages like English, Norwegian etc.

There are two claims here:

1) that (some) thought takes place in a language of some kind

2) that thoughts do not (in general) take place in a natural language

The argument for the first is that it is the best explanation that we know for the compositionality and productivity of thought. Rival theories of thought, such as e.g. an image theory, have great difficulty explaining how we could have thoughts that are logically complex, that have different forces: e.g. of assuming, wondering, desiring; that have quantificational meaning or negated meaning and much more.

Arguments for the second include: pre-linguistic infants and some animals can think; it's very unclear what it would be to learn the meanings of words in a natural language if we do not already have concepts to map the sounds onto.

Part II carries 40% of the overall mark.

Answer ONE question from this part.

QUESTION 1

a. Define these situation types: state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, semelfactive

They are defined in terms of three oppositions: stative/dynamic; durative/punctual; telic/atelic
states are stative, not dynamic: they involve enduring possession of a property

e.g. John has blue eyes

activities are dynamic, durative and atelic: ongoing process with no intrinsic end-state

e.g. John is eating (cake).

accomplishments are dynamic, durative and telic: ongoing process with an intrinsic end-state

e.g. John ate a cake.

semelfactives are dynamic, punctual and atelic: event at a point in time with no intrinsic end-state

e.g. John sneezed.

achievements are dynamic, punctual and telic: event at a point in time with an intrinsic end-state

e.g. John found his keys.

b. Categorise each of the following into one of the situation types you set out in (a), and give evidence for your classifications.

i. John sneezed.

Tests: *What happened was that John sneezed.* This is fine -> Not state

John sneezed all night has an iterative reading. -> semelfactive

Doris is sneezing has an iterative reading. -> semelfactive

Semelfactive.

ii. Mary ran in the park.

What happened was that *Mary ran in the park.* Fine -> not state

Mary ran in the park. (simple past) doesn't entail that she finished anything. -> atelic

?? *Mary ran in the park in half an hour* is weird.

Mary ran in the park for half an hour is good. These taken together imply that this is atelic and durative.

? *Mary finished running in the park.* This is a bit odd -> not durative and telic.

Atelic + durative = activity.

iii. John ran to the park.

What happened was that *John ran to the park.* Fine -> not state

John ran/has run to the park. (simple past/present perfect) both entail that he reached the park -> telic

John ran to the park in half an hour is good.

?? *John ran to the park for half an hour* is much less good. These taken together also imply that this is telic and durative.

John finished running to the park. This is fine -> durative and telic.

Telic + durative = accomplishment.

iv. The lecture ended at 2pm.

What happened was that *the lecture ended at 2pm.* Fine -> Not state

The lecture ended at 2pm. (simple past) entails that the lecture is finished -> telic

?? *The lecture finished ending (at 2pm).* This is bad, which implies that noticing someone is (treated by the language as) either non-durative or atelic. But we know that it is telic (see above). So it must be non-durative.

Non-durative + telic = achievement.

v. Mary taught her son to swim.

What happened was that *Mary taught her son to swim*. Fine -> not state

Mary taught/has taught her son to swim. (simple past/present perfect) both entail that he learned to swim -> telic

Mary taught her son to swim in half an hour is good.

? *Mary taught her son to swim for half an hour* is a bit odd. These taken together also imply that this is telic and durative.

Mary finished teaching her son to swim. This is fine -> durative and telic.

Telic + durative = accomplishment.

vi. John is right-handed.

??What happened was that *John is right-handed*. Implies that this is a state.

??*Be right-handed*, John! The imperative is also weird. -> state

?? *John is being right-handed*. Present progressive is weird -> state

No habitual reading for the present simple -> state

State

OR

QUESTION 2

a. Explain what the following (ungrammatical) data illustrate:

Predicates require/allow different numbers of arguments.

i. *Homer snores Bart.

snores is not a two-place predicate: actually, it's a one-place predicate – e.g. *Homer snores* – where the argument is the snorer (the person producing the snoring)

ii. *Bart is taller than.

is taller than is not a one-place predicate: actually, it's a two-place predicate – e.g. *Bart is taller than Lisa*

iii. *Homer puts Mr Burns.

puts is not a two-place predicate: actually, it's a three-place predicate: *Homer puts Mr Burns in the bin/under pressure*

b. Translate the following sentences into predicate logic, analyzing in as much detail as possible, and giving a key for each one. For example if the sentence were 'Bart does not like Milhouse', your answer should be something like: $\neg L(b, m)$ where $L(x, y) = x$ likes y ; $b =$ Bart; $m =$ Milhouse)

i. Claire is Norwegian.

$N(c)$ or $NORWEGIAN(c)$

where $N(x) = x$ is Norwegian; $c =$ Claire

ii. Ben is not German.

$\neg GERMAN(b)$

key is obvious

iii. Anne admires Claire.

$ADMIRE(a, c)$

where $ADMIRE(x, y) = x$ admires y ; $a =$ Ann; $c =$ Claire

iv. Claire is between Anne and Ben in height.

$B(c, a, b)$

Where $B(x, y, z) = x$ is between y and z in height

Also possible to translate as a conjunction of two two-place predicates.

- v. Everyone admires Claire.

$\forall x \text{ ADMIRE}(x, c)$

Where the domain is people

or

$\forall x[\text{PERSON}(x) \rightarrow \text{ADMIRE}(x, c)]$

- vi. Every book is not interesting.

This is ambiguous:

1) all books are boring:

$\forall x[\text{BOOK}(x) \rightarrow \neg \text{INTERESTING}(x)]$

2) Not every book is interesting:

$\neg \forall x[\text{BOOK}(x) \rightarrow \text{INTERESTING}(x)]$

- vii. Some person loves every cat.

Also ambiguous

1) There is at least one person who loves all cats

$\exists x[\text{PERSON}(x) \wedge \forall y[\text{CAT}(y) \rightarrow \text{LOVE}(x, y)]]$

2) Each cat is loved by someone or other (maybe a different person for each cat)

$\forall x[\text{CAT}(x) \rightarrow \exists y[\text{PERSON}(y) \wedge \text{LOVE}(y, x)]]$

Part III carries 40% of the overall mark.

Answer ONE question from this part.

QUESTION 1

- a. Explain the distinction between constatives and performatives.

Performatives are speech acts that:

A. do not 'describe' or 'report' anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and

B. where the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something. (HTDWW p. 5)

e.g. I (hereby) name this ship the Mary Rose.

We find the defendant guilty as charged.

They have felicity conditions.

Constatives are speech acts where conditions A and B do not hold. They are statements, assertions and the like.

The ship was called the Mary Rose.

The foreman is pronouncing the defendant guilty.

They have truth conditions.

- b. Why did Austin advocate dropping this distinction, and what did he propose to replace it with?

He proposed dropping it because he thought that various lines of evidence show that constatives and performatives are not distinct classes.

There is no grammatical form that is dedicated to performatives: e.g. I promise to pay you ten pounds could be either a performative or a constative (e.g. in answer to 'How do you always manage to persuade me to come to the pub with you on a Sunday evening?')

The hereby test was supposed to pick out performatives but fails with some obvious constatives: *I hereby assert...*

It seems that constatives have felicity conditions:

e.g. it may be impossible to assert anything by saying *The ship was called the Mary Rose* if there's no ship that is accessible in the context.

His replacement was a scheme on which a speech act in general is three kinds of action in one: a locutionary act of saying a sentence with a certain content; an illocutionary act of e.g. promising, naming, asking, asserting...; a perlocutionary act aimed at affecting the thoughts and behaviour of the addressee and perhaps others.

c. Analyse the following in the terms of Austin's mature speech act theory and/or Searle's speech act theory:

i. Could you pass the butter?

This is an indirect speech act. The direct speech act is a question since the sentence type is interrogative.

In most cases this would be uttered in order to perform a request: this is an illocutionary force that Searle categorises as a directive: an attempt to make the addressee do something.

Here it's not clear that the direct speech act is intended.

ii. John [speaking to Mary]: That is your car on the yellow line, isn't it? It may interest you to know that there's a traffic warden coming down the street.

Another indirect speech act. The second sentence is a declarative sentence so the corresponding direct speech act is representative: assertion, statement or similar. But it is likely that it would be uttered as a warning. Searle would categorise this as a directive, if we assume that warnings are aimed at getting the addressee to take certain actions.

Note that here it seems that both the direct and the indirect speech act are intended by the speaker: it is both a statement and a warning.

iii. Mary [addressing her pet rabbits]: I hereby pronounce you man and wife.

This is a classic explicit performative. In Searle's categorisation it would be a declaration.

The point here is that the act has felicity conditions and these are presumably not met. Mary may be using the right form of words, but the participants are not the right kind: Mary presumably doesn't have the right status to perform marriage ceremonies, and rabbits can't participate in them. So this is a misfire, in Austin's terminology.

OR

QUESTION 2

a) Set out the essentials of Grice's theory of conversation.

Grice proposed that talk exchanges are governed by conversational maxims and a Cooperative Principle.

The CP

Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP): Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are involved.

The idea is that ordinary conversations are cooperative endeavours and, therefore, subject to certain standards that speakers try to comply with and that hearers expect to be respected.

For example, you can assume that I am telling the truth (or trying to, at least). That comes under what Grice called the maxims of Quality. There are two: one tells the speaker not to say things that he believes to be false; the other tells the speaker not to say things that he lacks adequate evidence for. These both fall under a supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Similarly, if I have bothered to open my mouth to speak to you (and take up some of your attention) you expect me to be saying something relevant, informative etc.

Maxims

Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

Quality

Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation

Be relevant

Manner

Supermaxim: Be perspicuous

1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly

For Grice, the maxims are rules or principles which interlocutors generally *should* observe in conversation. The claim is that a *rational* speaker in a conversation will try to be cooperative, and, other things being equal, this will involve obeying the maxims.

This framework is used to explain implicatures, i.e. speaker-intended implications of the utterance i.e. things that the speaker intends to convey, but does not say.

A hearer can expect a speaker to conform to the maxims unless there is a good reason for not doing so. As a result, both apparent and real violations of the maxims can be used to indicate that the speaker meant more than she said, that is, to convey an implicature. Implicatures can be worked out by the hearer on the assumption that the maxims or at least the Cooperative Principle are being observed at some level.

b) Explain how it may be applied to the examples below.

i. Student A: Did you do the reading and answer the questions for this week's class?

Student B: I did the reading.

What is said: B did the reading. [presumably which reading is obvious in the context]

What is implicated: B did not answer the questions for this week's class.

Maxim specially involved: The first maxim of quantity: "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)."

The hearer assumes that B is trying to be cooperative (the CP is in effect), so she should be observing the maxims. What she says answers only part of A's question. So she is not being as informative as the first quantity maxim requires: i.e. she is violating that maxim at the level of what is said. But if A assumes that B was also implicating that she did not answer the questions for this week's class, her overall speaker meaning (what is said + implicature) would have been as informative as required. And she knows that he will think this (etc.). So there is an implicature: B did not answer the questions for this week's class.

ii. Professor A: Dr X was your student, wasn't she? Would you recommend her for the job as a linguistics lecturer that we are advertising?

Professor B: Well, she was always on time for tutorials, and her spelling is excellent.

What is said: X was always on time for tutorials, and her spelling is excellent.

What is implicated: B would not /does not recommend X for the job in question.

Maxim specially involved: The maxim of relation: "Be relevant."

A assumes that B is trying to be cooperative (the CP is in effect), so she should be observing the maxims. What she says is not in itself relevant to A's question. So she is not being relevant – i.e. she is violating the maxim of relation – at the level of what is said. But if A assumes that B was also implicating that B would not /does not recommend X for the job in question, her overall speaker meaning (what is said + implicature) would have been relevant, as required. And she knows that he will think this (etc.) So there is an implicature: B would not /does not recommend X for the job in question (or some similar proposition).

iii. Student A: Do you like Professor B's classes?

Student B: He's a dinosaur.

This is a bit complicated.

What is said: Prof B is a [literal] dinosaur. [Strictly speaking, B only 'makes as if' to say this – because he doesn't mean it, and what is said is part of what is meant for Grice.]

What is implicated: Prof B is like a dinosaur [in certain respects – e.g. very outdated]. \

And: Student B does not like prof B's classes.

Maxims specially involved: First Maxim of Quality and Maxim of Relation

First, the metaphor:

the hearer assumes that the speaker is trying to be cooperative (the CP is in effect), so she should be observing the maxims. What she says is blatantly untrue (Since, obviously, Prof B is not a [literal] dinosaur; So the first maxim of quality has been flouted (= blatantly violated).

Now, Grice says, the hearer can suppose that the speaker is implicating a related simile: e.g. Prof B is like a dinosaur [in certain respects].

Given that the speaker knows that the hearer can assume that the speaker means this extra thing, then it is implicated (i.e. the speaker is able to intentionally imply it as part of what (s)he means because (s)he can be confident that the hearer can work it out).

So the CP is involved, because if the hearer couldn't assume that the speaker was being cooperative he wouldn't be able to assume that the speaker had a good reason for flouting the quality maxim. (All bets would be off. The speaker might just be making noises to amuse him/herself.)

And the first quality maxim is involved because it is flouted at the level of what is said (which is false in all these cases) in order to implicate something true.

N.B., the supermaxim of quality is not violated. The speaker (at least arguably) does make his/her contribution (her utterance meaning as a whole) one that is true.

The indirect answer to the question:

Implicating that Prof B is outdated doesn't answer A's question.

A continues to assume that B is trying to be cooperative (the CP is in effect), so she should be observing the maxims. Neither what she seems to say nor what she has so far implicated is in itself relevant to A's question. But if A assumes that B was also implicating that Student B does not like prof B's classes, her overall speaker meaning would have been relevant, as required. And she knows that he will think this (etc.) So there is an implicature: Student B does not like prof B's classes.

OR

QUESTION 3

Introduce and discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (or hypotheses). You should include discussion of hypotheses of different strengths and scopes, and arguments and evidence for or against these hypotheses.

Some questions about the relation of language and thought:

- Does the language we speak influence the way we think?
- Does it even render certain thoughts unthinkable?

Sapir-Whorf Hypotheses:

- a) Strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the only conceptual distinctions we can make are those in our language; and the reason for this is that our language imposes those distinctions on our sense data (and we have no other source for such distinctions).
- b) Restricted Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: there are some topics such that the only conceptual distinctions we can make regarding them are those encoded in our language; and the reason for this is that our language imposes those distinctions on the relevant sense data (and we have no other source for such distinctions).
- c) Watered-down Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: there are some topics such that the way we habitually or stereotypically think about them is influenced by the language we speak. (Elbourne, 2011)

Evidence against (a):

- i) we have plenty of concepts for things that we don't have words for: e.g. dust bunnies; e.g. new coinages
- ii) some people with no language have conceptual competence (e.g. Ildefonso (Schaller, 1991); infants).

Ildefonso is/was a Mexican Indian who was apparently born deaf, and had not been exposed to sign language, and therefore had not acquired any natural language at all.

Susan Schaller met him when he came to a class she was teaching in English reading for deaf people. She started trying to teach him American Sign Language and made some progress.

Problems: anecdotal evidence; Schaller not a linguist; account written much later (published 1991)

Evidence for (b)?:

The Pirahã are a group of indigenous hunter-gatherers who live in a part of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil.

There have been a lot of claims made about their language, also called Pirahã

Gordon's experiments with the Pirahã: "the studies show that their impoverished counting system limits their ability to enumerate exact quantities when set sizes exceed two or three items."

It's even controversial whether they have any number words at all, since the words that are sometimes translated as 'one' and 'two' can be elicited by larger collections of objects in certain circumstances.

But does the lack of words cause the lack of ability? Or does a lack of number concepts lead to a lack of number words?

Perhaps some hunter-gatherer societies are likely not to need number concepts, just as our society lacked the concepts FAX and MOBILE PHONE until recently. Certainly the Pirahã have a very different society to the ones we are used to. And there is a correlation between hunter-gather societies and relatively reduced number systems.

So (b) is unproven.

Evidence for (c)?

Boroditsky's experiments on gender and number.

Some languages have grammatical gender, not just in words for animate beings, but in words for other things, like apple or bridge.

- Effect of matching gender on memorisation of names. e.g. easier to remember the name Patrick for an apple in German, where the genders match than in Spanish where the word for apple is feminine – and vice versa with Patricia.

- Production of gender-stereotypical adjectives for objects: e.g. for bridge, which is feminine in German and masculine in Spanish. Tendency to get beautiful, elegant, fragile, pretty, slender from German speakers and big, dangerous, towering, long, strong from Spanish speakers.

But these leave the direction of causation open: e.g. it could be that German culture sees bridges as feminine, and that is why the gender is feminine and why German-speakers produce feminine adjectives.

- But experiment with invented language shows similar effect.

So language is a causal factor.

But effects are small!

So the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is pretty surely false.

The restricted Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is at best unproven.

i.e. the hypothesis according to which what thoughts one is capable of having is determined by what language(s) one speaks is at best unproven (after a lot of looking)

The watered-down Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is true, but only has weak results:

e.g. 86% success in remembering a name where the gender matched the participants' native language versus 78% success in remembering a name where the gender did not match the participants' native language