

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Information exchange and other functions of language

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EXPRESSING MEANING AND CONVEYING INFORMATION

- Language can **express meaning** – semantically or pragmatically.
- This capacity of language is typically **used** by people to **convey or exchange information** about the world (broadly construed).
 - INFORMATIVE/REFERENTIAL/REPRESENTATIONAL function of language
- Receiving new information corresponds to partial **alleviation of ignorance**.

REPRESENTATION OF INFORMATION

In **POSSIBLE WORLDS SEMANTICS** an information state – as well as doxastic state (what a person believes), epistemic state (what a person knows), or bouletic state (what a person wants or wishes) – corresponds to a set of possible worlds considered to be candidates for the actual world.

Menzel 2017

- (1) a. Sue believes that the Earth is flat.
↪ In all possible worlds which Sue believes to be candidates for the actual world, the Earth is flat.
- b. Sue has no idea what shape the Earth is.
↪ In the worlds that Sue believes to be candidates for the actual world, there are such where the Earth is flat and others where it is round (and possibly others)

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

(2) A Has granny taken her medicine?

Granny has taken her medicine.

Granny has not taken her medicine.

} *actual world here*

B₁ Yes, she has.

Granny has taken her medicine.

Granny has not taken her medicine.

} *actual world here*

B₂ No, she hasn't.

Granny has taken her medicine.

Granny has not taken her medicine.

} *actual world here*

B₃ I don't know.

Granny has taken her medicine.

Granny has not taken her medicine.

} *actual world here*

SOURCES OF NEW INFORMATION

The source of new information can be both semantic and pragmatic:

- (3) A Are you going jogging?
B I have a terrible headache.

Information exchange:

- Technically, B does not answer A's question.
- Still, A learns that B has a terrible headache.
- A knows that it is very unlikely that somebody with a terrible headache will go jogging.
- A concludes that B is not going. Hence, A gets her answer.

Later in the lectures → MAXIM OF RELEVANCE (Grice 1975)

OTHER FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

In some interactions, information exchange is not primary or even very backgrounded

- Expressives (*Damn! Wow, what a day!* 😊)
→ EXPRESSIVE/EMOTIVE/AFFECTIVE function
- Directives (*Open the door!*)
→ CONATIVE function
- Poetry, lyrics, art (form important, loose connection to meaning)
→ POETIC function

Jakobson 1960

OTHER FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

Some linguistic interactions lead to almost no information exchange. They serve a completely different purpose.

- greetings (*hello, how are you, what's up*)
- politeness expressions (*thank you, congratulations, welcome!*)
- small-talk
- language varieties (slang, dialects, etc.)
 - SOCIAL/PHATIC function

Some language use does not even involve COMMUNICATION:

- Thoughts
- Speaking to oneself
 - PRIVATE use of language

Next time: Functions of language via speech act theory (Searle 1969)

READING AND WATCHING TIPS

Influential proposals on the functions of language:

Jakobson, Roman. 1960. Linguistics and poetics. In Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in language*, 350-377. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. 1973. *Explorations in the functions of language*. London: Edward Arnold.

YouTube video:

- Carlos Pittella: Functions of language (according to Jakobson)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jc6DbvW31g>

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- Menzel, Christopher. 2017. Possible worlds. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/possible-worlds/>.
- Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.