

What sentences do

Act 3: The Pragmatics of the Table

Tom Roberts

Utrecht University

EGG, 30 July 2025

Desiderata for a theory

From yesterday, commonalities (we think so far) of declarative and interrogative utterances:

Declarative p	Interrogative $p?$
Sp commitment to truth of p joint attention to p expect future Ad commitment to p	invokes alternatives $p, \neg p$ requests information

Updates in the Table: recap

Discourse effects of uttering declarative p :

- ✦ Add the (singleton) issue containing only p to the Table
- ✦ Add $cg + p$ to the projected set

Discourse effects of uttering interrogative q :

- ✦ Add q to the Table
- ✦ For every $p \in q$, add $cg + p$ to the projected set

What did we achieve?

Basic discourse effect of uttering a declarative: pretty good!

- ✦ *Sp* commitment to p , directs attention to p , conveys expected *Ad* commitment to p

Basic discourse effect of uttering an interrogative: also pretty good!

- ✦ no inherent *Sp* commitment, joint attention to alternatives, seems to request address to make a choice

Where can we improve?

Empirical shortcomings:

- ✦ No account of intonation
- ✦ No account of question bias
- ✦ Our list of properties might need further spelling out ('request information', 'attention')

Theoretical shortcomings:

- ✦ Discourse effects of declaratives/interrogatives are similar, but different in a stipulative way

(Some of) the problem cases

(1) **Rising declaratives**

- a. You ate a whole pizza by yourself?
- b. Vorbești engleza↑?
speak.2SG English
'Do you speak English?'

Romanian

(2) **Fiction**

Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father.

(3) **Sarcasm**

- a. It's so great that climate change is irradiating the planet.
- b. A: I just aced my exam!
B: #(And) I'm the Queen of Spain.

(4) **Rhetorical question**

Child: Can you get me a snack from the fridge?

Parent: Am I your servant?

(5) **Hyperbole**

There were a billion people at the Beyoncé concert.

Agenda for today

1. Small amendment to the semantics of declaratives
2. Spell out the pragmatics of updates in the Table
3. See how these pragmatics can help us understand (at least some) problem cases
4. Do we need to revise our basic discourse effects?

Back to sentence meaning

Issues for the standard view

The difference in discourse effects between declaratives and interrogatives so far is stipulative:

- ✦ Declarative utterances make commitment, interrogatives don't
- ✦ Interrogatives add their content to the Table, declaratives add **the set containing** their content to the table

Another view?

Having a typewise contrast between declaratives and interrogatives good for handling their differences, but less their similarities

e.g. some predicates can combine with both clause types:

(6) Gustav knows/said/is happy that/whether it is raining.

Response particles like *yes/no* occur in responses to both:

- (7) a. A: Did you eat all the charcuterie?
B: Yes, I did./No, I didn't.
- b. A: You ate all the charcuterie.
Yes, I did. No, I didn't.

A way forward

Idea: What if we treat declarative and interrogative denotations as the same type of formal object? (Hamblin 1973)

- ✦ Denotation of declarative p : $\{p\}$
- ✦ Denotation of polar interrogative $p?$: $\{p, \neg p\}$

Small change, but immediate benefits for our theory:

- ✦ Decl/Int utterances now both just put their content on the Table directly
- ✦ Different impositions on the addressee follow from differences in singleton vs. non-singleton content (in a way to be spelled out)
- ✦ Difference in commitment remains stipulative (at this stage) - could we *derive* it somehow?

Utterance pragmatics

Cooperativity revisited

Grice's (1975) famous **cooperative principle**:

Cooperative Principle

“Make your conversational 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 engaged.”

Grice's maxims

Being cooperative means adhering to certain general principles ('maxims'):

1. **Quality**: Say only what you believe to be true (**Don't lie!**) and have sufficient evidence for (**Don't bs!**)
2. **Quantity**: Say as much as is required; not more (**Don't give TMI!**), not less (**Don't leave out relevant details!**)
3. **Relevance**: Make your utterance relevant to the purpose of the conversation. (**Don't go off topic!**)
4. **Manner**: Make what you say clear, unambiguous, brief, and in the order that best suits the purpose of the conversation. (**Don't be confusing!**)

Background assumption: everyone is being cooperative by default.

Some maxims for the Table

Grice for our purposes

Grice's maxims are also mostly tailored for assertive utterances.

- ✦ Being 'truthful' (Quality) is not a relevant notion for whether it's appropriate to ask a question

Desired: notion of 'cooperativity' that is applicable both to utterances of declaratives and interrogatives

Starting point: collaborativity of conversations in the Table model:

- ✦ Participants all committed to the same goal, namely ensuring the *cg* resolves the top of the Table
- ✦ Participants behave in a way that doesn't interfere in the pursuit of the above goal

The maxims of the Table

Updating our framework: some new Maxims for the Table, following Rudin (2022).

Not a replacement for Grice's maxims, but a companion tailored to appropriate **commitment** and **projection**

- ❖ Make sure that commitments are faithful to actual beliefs
(SINCERITY, PUBLICITY)
- ❖ Make sure that the future of the conversation is sensible
(VIABILITY, COMPREHENSIVENESS)

Sincerity

Analog of Gricean **Maxim of Quality**

Intuition: Cooperative speaker should only make public commitments which align with their true beliefs

(8) SINCERITY:

Do not add p to DC_{sp} if $DOX_{sp} \not\subseteq p$

(DOX_X = set of worlds compatible with X 's beliefs)

Violations of Sincerity:

- ❖ Lies
- ❖ Claims you're not sure of
- ❖ Sarcasm (*I'm the Queen of Spain.*)

Analog of Gricean **Maxim of Quantity**

Intuition: Cooperative speaker should commit to the content of issues they put on the Table (if they believe in it)

(9) PUBLICITY:

For issue I , given that $DOX_{sp} \subseteq \bigcup I$, do not put an I on the Table without committing to $\bigcup I$

Will not do much in our current setting, since asserting singleton issues is always paired with commitment.

Viability

Maxims for **projectivity** (no Gricean analog): what discourse moves make reasonable expectations of *Ad*?

Intuition: It's not cooperative to put *Ad* in a position to commit to something they don't believe

- (10) VIABILITY: For all p :
- Do not add $cg + p$ to ps if you believe that $\bigcap DC_X \cap p = \emptyset$ for some interlocutor X .
 - Do not add $cg + p$ to ps if you believe that $Dox_X \cap p = \emptyset$ for some interlocutor X .

Violations of Viability:

- ✦ Questions you know the answer to (rhetorical q's, exam q's)
- ✦ Questions to which you think the addressee knows **some particular** answer (rhetorical q's)
- ✦ Assertions you know the addressee disagrees with

Comprehensiveness

Intuition: We shouldn't unnecessarily rule out future discourse moves that are compatible with the context set

(11) COMPREHENSIVENESS

Do not add $cg + p$ to ps if there is a world $w \in cs$ such that $w \notin (cg + p)$ and $\{w\}$ is viable

Violations of Comprehensiveness:

- ✦ Assertions with unfounded presuppositions

Non-canonical utterances

A question

Can these maxims help us derive effects of non-canonical utterances?

Parallel: Flouting of Gricean maxims

(12) Alastair: Are you hungry?

Begonia: I just had dinner. \rightsquigarrow I'm not hungry

Leveraging **appearance of** violating maxim of relevance to generate inference

- \Rightarrow B appears to violate maxim of relevance
- \Rightarrow A nevertheless believes B to be cooperative, so they must be trying to convey a relevant message after all
- \Rightarrow The most plausible relevant message: B is not hungry

Non-canonical example: quiz questions

- (13) a. *Geography novice to friend*: Is Zagreb the capital of Croatia?
 \rightsquigarrow *Sp* doesn't know whether Zagreb is the capital
- b. *Teacher to student*: Is Zagreb the capital of Croatia?
 ~~\rightsquigarrow~~ *Sp* doesn't know whether Zagreb is the capital

What's the difference?

- ✦ In (b), the teacher adds a non-VIABLE future for the *cg*, enhanced by the false *Zagreb is not the capital*
- ✦ Student, assuming teacher is cooperative needs to reason why the teacher would appear to violate VIABILITY
- ✦ Their goal in projecting multiple futures is not to enhance the *cg* per se

Non-canonical cases: sarcasm

- (14) Antigone: I have to go buy groceries today.
Bernadetta: Your life is so hard. \rightsquigarrow Your life is not hard

What's being violated?

- ✦ B's utterance is obviously **INSINCERE**
- ✦ A reasons: why would B commit to something obviously false?
 - \Rightarrow B's 'commitment' is in the context of A's previous utterance
 - \Rightarrow B thinks A's utterance was somehow inappropriate (because they shouldn't complain about small things)
 - \Rightarrow B makes another inappropriate utterance to signal the absurdity of A's presumed implicature (their life is hard)

At least some kinds of non-canonical meaning can be treated as implicatures which arise from flouting Table-y maxims

A next step: Integrating sentence-level intonation, tackling rising declaratives, (some) biased questions

Distant horizon: Imperatives, exclamatives, ...

References

Hamblin, Charles L. 1973. Questions in Montague English.
Foundations of Language 10(1). 41–53.