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## **COGNITIVE PRAGMATICS**

### **Lecture 5:**

Figurative and Manipulative Uses of Language:  
Irony, Insinuation, Backdoor Speech Acts, and Dog Whistles

*Figurative uses of language (→ stylistic tropes, figures of speech)*

- Rhetorical devices used to create specific stylistic effects in writing or speech.
- They involve a deviation from the literal meaning of words.

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- Rhetorical devices used to create specific stylistic effects in writing or speech.
- They involve a deviation from the literal meaning of words.
- Examples: *hyperbole, personifications, similes, etc.*

“I’ve told you a million times.”

“This suitcase weighs a ton.”

“I waited forever for the bus.”

“The wind whispered through the trees.”

“The city never sleeps.”

“Justice is blind.”

“Peter is like a computer.”

“Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.”

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

(2) John is a computer.

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

*irony*

(2) John is a computer.

*metaphor*

(1) Peter is a fine friend. *irony*

(2) John is a computer. *metaphor*

Grice:

- The meaning of a figurative utterance is a non-standard implicature associated with the *exploitation* (= *blatant* and *ostentatious flouting*) of the Maxim of Quality.

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- The meaning of a figurative utterance is a **non-standard** implicature associated with the *exploitation* (= *blatant* and *ostentatious flouting*) of the Maxim of Quality.
- Its interpretation involves *meaning substitution* rather than *meaning supplementation*.

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Grice:

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- Its interpretation involves *meaning substitution* rather than *meaning supplementation*.

- (3) E: How about going to the cinema together tonight?  
B: I have an exam tomorrow.

B says that *p* and *implies* that *q* *in addition*.

Speaker of (2) *makes as if to say* that *p* and *means* that *q* *instead*.

[?] Are metaphorical meanings implicated through  
the mechanisms involving the exploitation of the Maxim of Quality?

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(4) A: Is John coming to the party tonight?

B: He is a monk.

(5) A: Is Peter seeing women?

B: Well, he is not a monk.

[?] Are metaphorical meanings implicated through the mechanisms involving the exploitation of the Maxim of Quality?

(4) A: Is John coming to the party tonight?

B: He is a monk.

(E) JOHN IS A MONK\*.

(I) JOHN IS NOT COMING.

(5) A: Is Peter seeing women?

B: Well, he is not a monk.

MONK:

- IS A MEMBER OF A RELIGIOUS ORDER,
- IS RELIGIOUS,
- LIVES IN CELIBACY,
- AVOIDS LOUD PARTIES,
- IS HARD-WORKING, ...

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MONK\* and MONK\*\* are two *ad hoc* concepts contributing to the primary meanings of utterances (4B) and (5B), respectively.

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(E) PETER IS NOT A MONK\*\*.

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(6) John took out the key and opened the door.

LF JOHN TOOK OUT THE KEY AND OPENED THE DOOR.

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[!] Understanding metaphors and “literal” uses of language involve cognitive mechanisms of roughly the same type.

[?] How about irony? How does it work?

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(1) Peter is a fine friend.

Q1 What is the ironic meaning of (1)?

Q2 How do we recognize irony?

Q3 What is the point of irony?

Q4 What are the cognitive processes underlying irony comprehension?

[?] How about irony? How does it work?

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

Grice

Q1 What is the ironic meaning of (1)?

antiphrastic implicature  
(opposite to the lit. meaning)

Q2 How do we recognize irony?

blatant violation of  
the *Quality Maxim*

Q3 What is the point of irony?

no clear answer  
expression (?)

Q4 What are the cognitive processes  
underlying irony comprehension?

inferential procedure of  
meaning substitution

[?] How about irony? How does it work?

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

Echoic Theory (RT)

Q1 What is the ironic meaning of (1)?

dissociative attitude  
& echoed thought

Q2 How do we recognize irony?

contextual inappropriateness,  
ironic ton of voice, ...

Q3 What is the point of irony?

expression

Q4 What are the cognitive processes  
underlying irony comprehension?

expressive communication  
& echo

[?] How about irony? How does it work?

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(7) Tom is a bad speaker!

(8) What a boring movie!

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→ ironic criticisms (ironic blames) / ironic compliments (ironic praises)

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→ ironic criticisms (ironic blames) / ironic compliments (ironic praises)

Context (7): Before Tom's speech, Ann said that Tom was a poor speaker.

Context (8): When we were deciding on *Skyfall*,  
someone said it was supposedly a boring movie.

Compare:

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(2) John is a computer.

(9) Open the window!

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(9) Open the window!

- (10)
- a. *I order you to* open the window.
  - b. *I request that you* open the window.
  - c. *I advise that you* open the window.
  - d. *I permit you to* open the window.

Compare:

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

(2) John is a computer.

(12) *Metaphorically speaking*, John is a computer.

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Compare:

(1) Peter is a fine friend.

(11) \* ***Ironically speaking***, Peter is a fine friend. !!!

(2) John is a computer.

(12) ***Metaphorically speaking***, John is a computer.

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(10) a. ***I order you to*** open the window.

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**Hypothesis:** Irony is a form of *non-overt speech*.

## Non-Overt Speech (NOS)

Each act of *non-overt speech* is **intended** to produce a characteristic effect.

Its **successful performance** requires that the speaker's **intention** to produce this effect:

(*c*<sub>1</sub>) remains unrecognized by the intended target or addressee,

(*c*<sub>2</sub>) is *neither* openly discussed within the conversation *nor* made explicit, even if recognized and intended to be recognized, or

(*c*<sub>3</sub>) can be plausibly denied by the speaker, even if it becomes a subject of open discussion.

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(*c*<sub>1</sub>) — *covert acts*;

(*c*<sub>2</sub>) — *back door speech acts, irony (?)*

(*c*<sub>3</sub>) — *insinuation, innuendo, dog-whistles*.

## *Likely Reviewer*

Tom is about to submit his first research paper to a highly ranked journal. He knows that Ann Smith is a well-established expert on the topics the paper discusses and predicts that the journal editors are likely to invite her to review the manuscript. Consequently, Tom begins one of the paragraphs with the following words:

- (13) In her insightful and ground-breaking paper,  
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***Flattering as a covert act*** (Bach and Harnish 1979): condition ( $c_1$ )

(C) In uttering  $U$ ,  $S$  performs a covert act if and only if  $S$  intends:

- ( $i_1$ ) to produce by uttering  $U$  a certain response  $R$  on the part of  $H$ ,
- ( $i_2$ ) for  $H$  not to recognize ( $i_1$ ).

Tom's ulterior motive behind his choice of words in (13) is to prejudice Ann Smith in favour of the submitted manuscript. This plan would be thwarted if recognized by the reviewer.

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### *Santa Claus*

Within hearing distance of their daughter Nora, Ann says to her husband:

- (14) I sure hope the kids settle down tonight.  
Santa only comes if the kids are asleep. (McGowan 2024)

## *Arrested Surgeon*

Zbigniew Ziobro, Poland's Minister of Justice and the Attorney General from 2005 to 2007, calls a press conference after arresting a famous surgeon on charges of corruption.

After presenting footage depicting the moment of arrest, Ziobro says:

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[!] ZZ's intention to present the allegation *as something already established* would be frustrated if explicitly represented in discourse.

(15') Hey, wait a minute!

Are you trying to say that the arrested surgeon is a murderer?

→ **Blocking as Counter-Speech** (Langton 2018)

## *Difficult Exam*

(16) A: Was the exam difficult?

B: Even Tom passed.

→ **A back door negative evaluation**

*Private Sector* (Fraser 2001)

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**Back-door ascriptions of ignorance/knowledge:**

- (17.1) a. Al Gore is ignorant about how the private sector works.  
b. Bill Bradley knows how the private sector works.

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???:

- (17.2) a. Al Gore lacks the credentials required of a president.  
b. Al Gore is not a good candidate for the presidency.  
c. Bill Bradley possesses credentials required of a president.  
d. Bill Bradley is a good candidate for the presidency.

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### **Invited inferences:**

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*Fundamental Values* (Fraser 2001)

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### **A back door negative evaluation of the current situation:**

(18.1) We are not a society with fundamental values.

### **Invited inferences:**

- (18.2) a. Bill Clinton is responsible for the moral crisis we are facing.  
b. Al Gore, as Bill Clinton's vice-president, shares this responsibility.  
c. All Gore is not a good candidate for the president.

## *Source of Money*

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→ **insinuation**

[!] The president's communicative plan succeeds only if he manages to put himself in a position where he can plausibly deny having intended to convey that the businessman is dishonest.

→ **plausible deniability** (like in [invited inferences?](#))

→ *off-record* record communication (Brown and Levinson 1987)

## *Speeding Driver*

- (20) a. I'm in a bit of a hurry.
  - b. Is there any way we can settle this right now? (Pinker 2007)
- (20') I'll pay you \$50, and you'll let me off the hook.

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→ the Strategic Speaker Model (Pinker et. al 2008)

	dishonest officer	honest officer
do not bribe	<i>traffic ticket</i>	<i>traffic ticket</i>
explicit bribe	<i>go free</i>	<i>arrested for bribery</i>
insinuated bribe	<i>go free</i>	<i>traffic ticket</i>

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[!] The insinuator strategically exploits the mechanism of conversational implicature (→ cancellability).

## *The Puzzle of Insinuation*

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→ How is *plausible deniability* produced?

## *The Puzzle of Insinuation*

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→ How is *plausible deniability* produced?

utterance  $U$  → directly conveying  $P$  → indirectly implying  $Q$

Cancelling phrases:

*I didn't mean to imply that  $Q$ !*

*I don't mean that  $Q$ !*

*But not- $Q$ !*

*Distinguish between*

(*DC*) diagnostic cancellation,

(*CC*) conversational cancellation,

(*CD*) conversational denial.

(*DC*) is a test available to a theoretician who wants to determine if a specific implication of an utterance merits description as a conversational implicature.

(*CC*) and (*CD*), in turn, are two discourse moves that can be performed by actual speakers in real dialogical settings; they impose different constraints on the discourse context in which they can be made and produce different effects.

(DC)

A *putative* or *potential* implicature *Q* of *U* can be appropriately cancelled if one can add the cancelling phrase without producing a semantic contradiction. (Sadock 1978: 290; Jaszczolt 2009; Zakkou 2018)

### *Garage*

(21) A: I'm out of petrol.

B: There is a garage round the corner. (Grice 1975/1989)

*But it is closed (but it doesn't sell petrol).*

### *Cinema*

(22) A: How about going to the cinema tonight?

B: I have an exam tomorrow.

*But I will join you.*

(CC)

A move that affects the incremental process of discourse meaning construction.

It consists in juxtaposing, within a single utterance, (*a*) a sentence whose utterance can give rise to implicature *Q* and (*b*) an appropriate cancellation phrase.

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It consists in juxtaposing, within a single utterance, (a) a sentence whose utterance can give rise to implicature *Q* and (b) an appropriate cancellation phrase.

### *Garage*

- (21) A: a. I'm out of petrol.  
B: b. There is a garage round the corner,  
c. *But it's closed.*

### *Meeting a Woman*

- (22) a. X is meeting a woman this evening  
b. — *his sister, in fact.* (Geurts 2010)

The intent behind turns (21c) and (22b) is to *prevent* the addressee from deriving the *potential* implicatures of (7b) and (8a), respectively.

(CD)

Its appropriateness requires that *S* has been challenged by their interlocutor.

*Sally and Harry*

(23) Sally: a. This is the third time this week that I have seen  
John getting off the bus at the stop near Maria's place.

Harry: b. Do you mean that John and Maria are having an affair?

Sally: c. I don't intend to imply anything of that sort!

## *Estate Agent*

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*p*<sub>30.1</sub> The agent *discourages* the couple from buying a house in the suburban area.

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## *Estate Agent*

(30) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable settling in a more ... transitional neighbourhood, like Ashwood? (Camp 2018: 43)

*p*<sub>30.1</sub> The agent *discourages* the couple from buying a house in the suburban area.

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- (30<sub>D</sub>)
- a. I didn't mean to imply anything like that!
  - b. I only meant that you would feel better in this up-and-coming area, which offers many bars, clubs, theatres, cinemas, and other places attractive to people in your situation.

→ fully-fledged denial (Mazzarella 2023)

→ contextually plausible denial (Witek 2024)

## *Estate Agent*

(30) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable settling in a more ... transitional neighbourhood, like Ashwood? (Camp 2018: 43)

*p*<sub>30.1</sub> The agent *discourages* the couple from buying a house in the suburban area.

*p*<sub>30.2</sub> Because of their identity, the couple is not welcome in the suburban area.

- (30<sub>D</sub>) a. I didn't mean to imply anything like that! *disavowal*
- b. I only meant that you would feel better in this up-and-coming area, which offers many bars, clubs, theatres, cinemas, and other places attractive to people in your situation. *alternative interpr.*

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## *Speeding Driver*

- (20) a. I'm in a bit of a hurry.  
b. Is there any way we can settle this right now? (Pinker 2007)
- (20<sub>D</sub>) a. I didn't mean to imply anything along those lines!  
b. I was only wondering whether I could pay the fine on the spot.

## *Badgers in the House of Lords*

„On 4 July 1967, the House of Lords approved the decriminalization of homosexuality in the UK. The bill was promoted by Lord Arthur Gore (...); Gore was known both for the promotion of this bill and for his unsuccessful yet relentless efforts to reform laws for the protection of badgers (...). When he was asked why his bill on homosexuality succeeded, while his effort to protect badgers had failed, he allegedly replied:

(26) There are not many badgers in the House of Lords.”

(Preston 2016; see: Oswald 2022)

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## *Ann's Cake*

Ann and Kate brought their home-made cakes to a party organized by John.

(27) *John*: Ann, your cake was delicious.

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[!] *weak versus strong implicatures*

*In sum*

- Weak implicatures are more prone than strong implicatures to *strategic exploitation* for the purposes of insinuation.
- The contextual plausibility of a denial requires the availability of an alternative interpretation (→ *fully-fledged denial*).

*Psychologically / epistemically plausible denial*

***Speeding Driver***

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- b. I was only wondering whether I could pay the fine on the spot.

***Estate Agent***

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## *Estate Agent*

(30) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable settling in a more ... transitional neighbourhood, like Ashwood? (Camp 2018: 43)

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*p*<sub>30.1</sub> The agent *discourages* the couple from buying a house in the suburban area.

→ partially overt pretence

*p*<sub>30.2</sub> Because of their identity, the couple is not welcome in the suburban area.

→ invited inference

*Tom's lecture*

(31) Tom's lecture was really great!

covertly pretended praising → *flattering*

overtly pretended praising → *irony*

## *Tom's lecture*

(31) Tom's lecture was really great!

covertly pretended praising → *flattering*

partially overtly pretended praising → *insinuation ???*

overtly pretended praising → *irony*

## *Estate Agent*

(30) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable settling in a more ... transitional neighbourhood, like Ashwood? (Camp 2018: 43)

*p*<sub>30.1</sub> The agent *discourages* the couple from buying a house in the suburban area.

→ *partially overt pretence*

*p*<sub>30.2</sub> Because of their identity, the couple is not welcome in the suburban area.

→ *invited inference*

## *Three effects of insinuation*

*E1* To convey a certain controversial and risky opinion while maintaining plausible deniability.

*E2* To shift the responsibility for contributing this opinion from *S* to *H*.

*E3* To put a stain on the target's reputation or name.

## *Three effects of insinuation*

*E1* To convey a certain controversial and risky opinion while maintaining plausible deniability.

→ *off-record communication* (Pinker et al. 2008; Camp 2018)

*E2* To shift the responsibility for contributing this opinion from *S* to *H*.

→ *shift of responsibility* (Camp 2018)

*E3* To put a stain on the target's reputation or name.

→ *staining effect* (Bell 1997; Fraser 2001)

## *Shift of Responsibility*

### *Sally and Harry*

(23) Sally: a. This is the third time this week that I have seen  
John getting off the bus at the stop near Maria's place.

Harry: b. Do you mean that John and Maria are having an affair?

Sally: c. I don't intend to imply anything of that sort!

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Sally: c. I don't intend to imply anything of that sort!

d. *You said it, not me!*

## *Staining Effect*

[!] The stain left by an insinuation can persist even after a successful denial.  
What's more, the denial itself can sometimes amplify the effect.

## *Veiled Accusation of Sleaze*

(26) Matalin: We've never said to the press that  
he's a philandering, pot smoking draft dogger.

(Bell 1997: 47)

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[!] The same holds for the *Estate Agent*.

## *Symmetric Insinuation*

### *Tacit Negotiation*

- (27) *D*: a. I'm in a bit of a hurry.  
b. Is there any way we can settle this right now?
- O*: c. Well, we have a special holiday fund  
for police officers' children.
- D*: d. I would be glad to contribute to that.
- O*: e. That could work.
- D*: f. What's the usual contribution?
- O*: g. Most people donate around 60 dollars.
- D*: h. I have only 45 on me right now.
- O*: i. That's perfectly fine.

## *Are unintended insinuations possible?*

### *Tony and His Axe*

Tony is walking around a plant nursery, intending to buy an axe and pesticide. At some point, he notices Mr. Piocosta.

(28) T.: Mr. Piocosta, right? How are you doing?

You remember our boys? Went to camp Aheka together.

P.: Of course, Tony, how are you?

T.: Good, good. **Your kid still got that killer crossover dribble?**

P.: Yeah, I guess so.

T.: (raising his hand in which he holds an axe)

**That's gonna get him a scholarship.**

P.: So how's Anthony?

T.: He's moody, you know, for a kid that age, you know.

P.: Well, it was nice seeing you, Tony.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The Sopranos", season 1, episode 4 "Meadowlands", directed by John Patteson, written by Jason Cahill.

## *Dog Whistles*

- (29) GB jr: Yet there's power, wonder-working power,  
in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.  
(Saul 2018: 362)

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(29) GB jr: Yet there's power, **wonder-working power**,  
in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.  
(Saul 2018: 362)

→ a coded word

two meanings & two audiences

- A public, innocuous interpretation available to the general audience;
- a private, coded message addressed to the subset of the general audience (= those 'in the know') and concealed in such a way that the rest of the general audience is unaware of its existence.