

# A Pragmatic Account of Loose Talk\*

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## 1 Loose Talk and 'Slack Regulators'

- The following exposition of 'loose talk' follows, in essence, the discussion in Lasersohn (1999).

- (1) I live in Berlin.  
*[Context: Speaker lives in Potsdam, which abuts Berlin, but is not part of it]*
- (2) Mary arrived at three o'clock. (Lasersohn 1999)  
*Context: Speaker knows that Mary arrived at 3:03.*
- (3) There were five hundred people at the rally.  
*Context: Speaker knows that there were exactly 493 people at the rally.*

- There are contexts in which a speaker can blamelessly assert any of these sentences under the indicated circumstances.
- Tempting assumption: **Berlin** is simply polysemous between two readings (and similarly for the other cases):
  - 'Berlin proper'
  - 'the Berlin area'

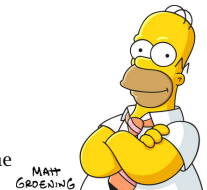
- But that cannot be right:<sup>1</sup>
- (4) a. #I live in Berlin proper and I am quite taken with my Potsdam neighborhood.  
b. #I live in Berlin and I am quite taken with my Potsdam neighborhood.  
c. I live in the Berlin area and I am quite taken with my Potsdam neighborhood.
  - (5) a. #Mary did arrive at exactly three o'clock, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.  
b. #Mary did arrive at three o'clock, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.  
c. Mary did arrive 3-ish, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.

If '(in) Berlin' would just be polysemous, (4b) should be just as felicitous as (4c), if the polysemy is resolved to the '(in) the Berlin area' reading.

- But (4b) is always contradictory, just as (4a) is.
- Solution: Truth-conditionally, **in Berlin always** means the same as **in Berlin proper**.
  - Similarly, **at three o'clock** is truth-conditionally equivalent to **at exactly three o'clock**.
- That is, if the speaker of (1) lives in Potsdam, the sentence he utters is literally false.
- And yet, (4) may be blamelessly asserted—this is what Lasersohn (1999) calls PRAGMATIC SLACK.

## Pragmatic Slack vs. Vagueness

- The contrast in (5) shows that pragmatic slack is distinct from truth-conditional vagueness, as in (6a):
- (6) a. Homer is bald.  
b. Homer is bald, he only has, like, two hairs left.
- (6b) is not contradictory in most contexts.
  - That indicates that (6a) can be literally true if Homer has some hairs left.



\*I am indebted to Cleo Condoravdi and Chris Potts for helpful discussion and comments. All remaining errors and inaccuracies are mine, and mine alone.

<sup>1</sup>(5b) is a variant of Lasersohn's example 37.

## Slack regulators

- I have shown that (7a) and (7b) are truth-conditionally equivalent:
  - (7) a. John is from Berlin.
  - b. John is from Berlin proper.
- Of course, **proper** still has an effect on the interpretation of the utterance:
  - (7b) cannot be used with slack (or not with as much slack as (7a)).
  - (7b) is, it seems, never appropriate when John lives in Potsdam.
- So, **proper** is what Lasersohn (1999) calls a SLACK REGULATOR.
- Lasersohn observes that slack regulators are not just a pragmatic signal that the utterance should be interpreted (more) strictly:
  - (8) John is from Berlin proper, but now lives in San Francisco.
    - In (8), **proper** ‘takes away’ the possibility of the speaker speaking loosely with respect to Berlin (e.g. John could not be from Potsdam).
    - But it does not take away the possibility of speaking loosely with respect to San Francisco (e.g. John could be living in San Bruno or Oakland, given the right context).

## Two partial accounts of pragmatic slack

- Lasersohn (1999) takes the fact that slack regulators selectively remove the slack from their complement as a cue that ‘pragmatic slack’ is computed compositionally.
- He proposes that each expression comes with a ‘pragmatic halo’ which is compositionally determined.
  - That is, he proposes an additional ‘dimension of meaning’.
  - Even though the ‘halos’ of complex expressions are determined compositionally, atomic expressions get there halos assigned by the context.
  - Lasersohn is (deliberately) silent about how this works.
  - That is, Lasersohn is (deliberately) silent about the pragmatics of loose talk.
  - His account really is only an account of the semantics of slack regulators.
- Krifka (2006) proposes a pragmatic account of the special case of loose talk with respect to number terms.
  - However, he does not say anything about slack regulators.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>In Krifka (1999), the author proposes a non-truth-conditional analysis for operators like **at most**. Per-

## 2 Pragmatic Halos

- Lasersohn proposes that each expression comes with a ‘pragmatic halo’.
- That is, he proposes a new ‘dimension of meaning’ in which halos are computed.
- The halo of any given expression  $\phi$  is a set of objects of the same type as the denotation of  $\phi$ , e.g. ...
  - ... if  $[\phi]$  is of type  $e$ , the halo of  $\phi$  will be a set of entities
  - ... if  $[\phi]$  is of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$  (a property of individuals), the halo of  $\phi$  will be a set of such properties.
  - ... if  $[\phi]$  is of type  $\langle s, t \rangle$  (a proposition), the halo of  $\phi$  will be a set of propositions
- The last example is what is the case at the sentence level.
- This set of propositions determines when a sentence is ‘felicitously assertable’: If, and only if, the halo of the sentence contains a true proposition.<sup>3</sup>
- Atomic expressions get their halos assigned ‘by the context’.
- The halo of complex expressions gets computed (for truth-conditional items) by point-wise function application (as in Rooth’s (1985) focus semantics and much subsequent work employing variants of alternative semantics).
- Slack regulators only operate on the halo of the expression they combine with: A ‘halo-tightener’ like **proper** will ‘shrink’ the halo (by removing some objects that are ‘far away’ from the denotatum).
  - (9) a. Mary arrived in Berlin at 3 o’clock.
  - b. Mary arrived in Berlin proper at 3 o’clock.
- Lasersohn is (deliberately) silent on how atomic expressions get assigned halos in context.
- But that means, he is (deliberately) silent about what ‘close enough to the truth to be assertable’ amounts to.
- On the pragmatic side, his proposal comes down to ‘sometimes, people speak a little loosely’.
- His proposal is really only about the semantics of slack regulators.

haps a similar analysis could be made to work for slack regulators. Interestingly, like Lasersohn’s account, this account is phrased in terms of alternatives that combine by point-wise function application. Unlike Lasersohn, Krifka allows his alternatives to become part of the denotational content at the sentence level.

<sup>3</sup>This definition works as it is, because Lasersohn assumes that the halo of an expression always contains the denotation of the expression.

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} [\text{Berlin}], \\ [\text{the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}] \\ [\text{the greater Berlin area}] \\ \dots \end{array} \right\}$$

Figure 1: A halo for **Berlin**

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} [\text{at 3:00}], \\ [\text{at 3:01}], [\text{at 3:02}], \dots \\ [\text{at 2:59}], [\text{at 2:58}], \dots \end{array} \right\}$$

Figure 2: A halo for **at three o'clock**

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} [\text{Mary arrived at 3:00 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:00 in the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:00 in the greater Berlin area}], \\ \dots \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:01 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:01 in the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:01 in the greater Berlin area}], \\ \dots \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:02 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:02 in the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:02 in the greater Berlin area}], \\ \dots \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in the greater Berlin area}], \\ \dots \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in the area comprising Berlin and Potsdam}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in the greater Berlin area}], \\ \dots \end{array} \right\}$$

Figure 3: A halo for **Mary arrived in Berlin at 3 o'clock**.

$$\{ [\text{Berlin}] \} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} [\text{Mary arrived at 3:00 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:01 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 3:02 in Berlin}], \\ \dots \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in Berlin}], \\ [\text{Mary arrived at 2:59 in Berlin}], \\ \dots \end{array} \right\}$$

Figure 4: A halo for **Berlin proper**

Figure 5: A halo for **Mary arrived in Berlin proper at 3 o'clock**.

### 3 A pragmatic account of loose talk

This talk outlines a pragmatic account of loose talk

- which does not rely on a separate dimension of meaning,
- yet can account for slack regulators,
- and has some additional empirical advantages over Lasersohn's account.

- **New observation:** If a speaker wants to elaborate on a loose assertion with the truth, he has to retract this assertion:

(10) Mary arrived at three. # When she wasn't there at 3:03 ...

(11) A: I live in Berlin.

B: Oh, where?

A: # Potsdam / # Potsdam, which is just outside of Berlin.

A: Actually, I live in Potsdam, which is ...

(but I study/work in Berlin / always go out in Berlin / etc.)

(12) A: Will we have enough coffee for the council meeting?

How many people will be there?

B: Thirty.

A: Great, then we have a quorum.

B: # No, we need 30 people for a quorum, but only 27 will be there.

- Thus, even if a speaker is (mutually assumed to be) speaking loosely, he still is committed to strict truth of his assertion.

## When will speakers (be expected to) speak loosely?

- With Condoravdi and Lauer (to appear) (generalizing ideas from Hamblin (1971) and Gunlogson (2008, & ms.)) I assume:

### Minimal Effect of the utterance of an indicative

Any (sincere) utterance of any indicative  $p$  commits the speaker to act as though (s)he believes  $p$ .

- See Condoravdi and Lauer (to appear) (and Lauer and Condoravdi (next week)) for details on how this commitment should be conceived of, and what 'acting as though (s)he believes' amounts to.
- What is important in the following is simply:
  - (13) If a speaker (sincerely) utters an indicative  $p$ , he cannot (without overt retraction of  $p$ ), utter anything that is (contextually) incompatible with  $p$ .
- I suggest that speakers (are expected to) 'speak loosely' simply when they think they can 'get away' with taking on this commitment.

### 'Getting away with' taking on a commitment

- When a speaker is speaking loosely, (s)he
  - either says something (s)he knows to be literally false (e.g. saying (14), knowing that John lives in Potsdam)
  - or says something that (s)he is not certain is literally true (e.g. saying (14), knowing only that John lives somewhere in the Berlin area).

(14) John lives in Berlin

- Two questions to consider when deciding on speaking loosely:

**Question 1:** Does uttering a literally false (or unsupported) sentence suit my immediate conversational goals as well as uttering a sentence that adequately reflects my knowledge or uncertainty?

**Question 2:** Will the commitment taken on by uttering the sentence get me into trouble later?

- **Question 1** is what is what is addressed in many of the recent(-ish) Game Theoretic approaches to pragmatics.

- A recurring 'problem' are WHITE LIE scenarios:

- Worlds:  $w_1, w_2, w_3$
- Possible addressee actions:  $a_1, a_2$
- In  $w_1, w_3 : a_{13} > a_2$   
In  $w_2 : a_2 > a_{13}$
- Messages:  $m_1, m_2, m_3$ , picking out single worlds
- $m_3$  is more costly for the sender than  $m_1$

Prediction: In  $w_3$  the speaker will utter  $m_1$ , which literally means 'we are in  $w_1$ '.

- I want to suggest that this prediction is not terribly problematic: It is exactly what is the case if **Question 1** has a positive answer.
- This is actually quite close to the kind of explanation Krifka (2006) employs for loose number talk and interpretation.
- **Question 2** is unanswered by such accounts (unless one moves to the theory of repeated games, which, to my knowledge, no pragmaticist has done so far).
  - For now, I will have to contend myself with saying that, if speaking loosely, the speaker takes it to be unlikely that the (possible) difference between the actual world and his assertion will become relevant in the future of the discourse.
- Question 2 makes apparent that 'speaking loosely' always carry a certain risk.
  - We predict that a speaker will only 'speak loosely' if he has an incentive to do so.
    - \* The false sentence may be shorter/more standard/easier to produce or process ... than a more prolix form that is known to be true or reflects the speaker's uncertainty.
    - \* The false sentence may be preferable for other reasons (politeness, memory limitations, &c.).
    - \* The speaker may assume that the hearer assumes that he would speak loosely—in this case, being very exact might well trigger unwanted inferences on part of the hearer.
- In this view of things, 'speaking loosely' is nothing but one of a number of cases in which a speaker asserts a sentence he does not actually believe is true (others include cases of deliberate deception, bullshitting &c.)

## 'Slack regulation'

- Lasersohn's main argument for deriving 'allowed slack' compositionally:
  - Slack regulators take away the potential for slack only from their complement.
  - If 'allowable deviations' are recorded in a second dimension of meaning, we can simply let slack regulators operate on this dimension.
- But: Lasersohn's argument only really shows that the contribution of slack regulators depends on what they combine with—not really that they fully partake in compositional interpretation.

**Downward Compositionality** An expression  $e$  is DOWNWARD-COMPOSITIONAL iff the semantic contribution of  $e$  is a function from the meaning of the expression  $e$  syntactically combines with.

**Upward Compositionality** An expression  $e$  is UPWARD COMPOSITIONAL iff the semantic contribution of expressions containing  $e$  are a function of the meaning of  $e$  (and its other constituents).

- These two properties are logically independent: An expression can have either, or both, or none.
  - The truth-conditional operators we are used to (e.g. quantifiers, connectives, ...) are both downward- and upward-compositional (which we may express by calling them COMPOSITIONAL simpliciter).
  - An item that is neither downward- nor upward compositional is, arguably, English **please**.
  - Slack regulators, I want to suggest, are items that are downward- but not upward-compositional.
  - Another candidate for such operators: Modal particles like German **doch**, which typically combine with some kind of proposition, but contribute something to the containing utterance 'globally'.<sup>4</sup>
- The meaning of non-upward-compositional operators can be captured in various ways:
  - Through a separate dimension of meaning, effectively treating them as fully compositional, but taking care that they cannot interact with items higher up in the tree (the strategy of Potts (2005)).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g. Grosz (to appear) for a proposal that treats **doch** in this way—which Grosz calls 'non-compositional'.

- By syntactically scoping the operator in question very high up in the sentence (perhaps at LF), so that it can combine with an (unpronounced) 'illocutionary operator'.
- By having their meaning make indexical reference to the containing utterance.
- I suggest that following the latter strategy will lead to a very parsimonious, simple explanation how the semantic contribution of these expressions 'pop up' to the utterance level.
- Thus, a slack regulator can predicate something about the utterance it is contained in.
- But what does it predicate?
- I suggest the following:

$[\text{proper}(P)]^u = \lambda P. \text{ the speaker of } u \text{ takes even slight deviations from } P \text{ to be relevant in the context of } u$

- The fact that **proper** 'reduces slack' comes about indirectly: If the speaker commits himself to the strict truth of the sentence, and at the same time is known / expected to take small deviations from  $P$  to be or become relevant, he cannot be speaking loosely with respect to  $P$ .
- The content of the slack regulator, however, does not become part of the asserted content of the utterance. Rather, the use of the slack regulator serves as a signal that is not asserted.
- Remaining problem: How does this 'signaling without asserting' work?<sup>5</sup>
  - My favored answer: **proper** and similar 'signaling' items are associated with conventions of use (see the appendix for details about this notion).
  - The upshot is that the signal is an contextual entailment of the fact that the utterance has been made, without being part of the asserted content.

## Some explanatory benefits

Not only does the the kind of account sketched here allow us to account for 'pragmatic slack' and 'slack regulators' without a separate dimension of meaning, but we also get some additional explanatory benefits:

<sup>5</sup>Do note that the question how something is 'signaled, but not asserted' also arises for a Potts-style multi-dimensional system and a 'scoping above a speech act operator' solution. It is independent of the question of how the semantic contribution of these items 'pops up' to the utterance level.

### General restrictions on the amount of slack speaker (are assumed to) employ

- On Lasersohn's account, any amount of slack should be permissible, if the context in question is of the right kind.
  - E.g. suppose that all that matters is the country I am from.
  - In fact, I am from Frankfurt am Main (loosely speaking).
  - On Lasersohn's account, I should feel free (and be expected) to utter (15):  
(15) I am from Berlin.
  - This prediction seems wrong.
- The account here, these general restrictions can be readily explained:
  - Recall that, on the present account, loose talk is risky.
  - But there are two expressions that are, by any measure, equally standard/brief/etc., viz. (16a) and (16b)  
(16) a. I am from Frankfurt.  
b. I am from Germany.
- In general the fact that speaking loosely involves a risk will act as a pragmatic pressure to 'keep close to the truth', as, at least in many cases, the risk increases with the 'distance from the truth'.
- At the same time, loose talk will be avoided if there is an equivalent expression that is not more costly (or inappropriately precise, etc.).

### Contradictions are infelicitous.

- Given his set-up, Lasersohn points out that he is in a predicament:
  - Logical contradictions are not necessarily infelicitous.
  - This is so because it is possible (indeed, expected) that the 'halo' of a contradiction contains a true sentence.
- Lasersohn's solution:
  - He suggests that in a sentence like (5b) (repeated below) is infelicitous not because it is contradictory, but because the speaker first makes a loose assertion and then follows it with a more precise one, indicating that he does take the difference to be relevant in context after all.
  - I don't think this line of argumentation works in general.

- The felicity of (5c) shows that such a shift in precision is pragmatically viable.

(5b) #Mary did arrive at three o'clock, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.

(5c) Mary did arrive three-ish, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.

- On the present account contradictions are infelicitous simply because it is never a good idea to commit yourself to act as though you believed in a contradiction.

### There are no slack regulators that increase the (expected) amount of slack

- There is a curious asymmetry with respect to slack regulators:
  - 'Pure' regulators that reduce the amount of possible slack abound.
  - Regulators that increase the amount of slack (i.e. hedges) always contribute to the truth conditions.
  - I.e. there are no 'pure slack widenings': Hedges always weaken the commitment a statement makes.
- On Lasersohn's account, this is curious: A 'halo widener' should be just as natural as a 'halo tightener'.
- Lasersohn admits that he has absolutely no explanation for why there should be such an asymmetry between tighteners and widenings.
- On the present analysis, such the use of such a hypothetical slack widener would be 'pragmatically contradictory': There simply would be no context in which a speaker would use them.
  - Uttering an expression with a (non-truth-conditional) widener would amount to the speaker committing himself to something and at the same time indicate that certain deviations from the truth are irrelevant in the context.
  - The speaker must have a reason to indicate this.
  - If the speaker were certain that the uttered sentence is true, there would be no reason to indicate that these deviations do not matter.
  - Thus the speaker must either be uncertain about the truth of the sentence or know that it is literally false.
  - So the real motivation for using a slack regulator would be to signal this latter fact.
  - But if he takes it to be necessary to signal that, he must take the (possible) deviation to be relevant.
  - That is, a speaker that would use such a widener would be signaling that he is taking possible deviations from the truth to be both relevant and irrelevant.

- Upshot: On the conception presented here, slack widenings would be pragmatically self-defeating.
- Prediction: At least in the presence of truth-conditional weakeners, such slack widenings would never be used, and vanish from the language.
- Alternatively, they may be reinterpreted as truth-conditional weakeners.

#### 4 Conclusion & a Puzzle

- This talk has shown that a pragmatic account of loose talk is viable, and that the semantics of 'slack regulators' can be stated without the need for a halo dimension.
- I have shown that assertions that are made while 'talking loosely' still create enduring commitments to the strict truth of the sentence.
  - This can be viewed as a vindication of truth-conditional semantics in the face of abundant loose talk.
  - While we may speak loosely a lot of the time, and what we communicate to each other, most of the time, will be the weak 'loose propositions', truth-conditions still matter, namely with respect to the public commitments a speaker incurs.
- I have suggested that 'slack regulators' can be seen as items that are downward-compositional, but not upward-compositional.
- A puzzle: While it is easy to think of items that are both up- and downward compositional, and items that are neither, are there items that are upward-compositional, but not downward compositional?
- If not, why not?

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## A Conventions of Use

- Q.: How can we model ‘signaling without asserting’?
- A CONVENTION OF USE is a convention in the sense of Lewis (1969).
  - Simplifying somewhat, these conventions are self-sustaining regularities of behavior in a population.
  - That is if (almost) everyone follows the regularity, then (almost) everyone has an incentive to follow it (almost) all of the time.
- Lewis (1975) proposes conventions of use already:
  - Lewis asks: Given there are many possible languages (mappings from forms to truth-conditions), what does it mean to say that language is used by a population?
  - Lewis’ answer: A language  $L$  is used by a population  $p$  iff there is a convention of truthfulness and trust with respect to  $L$  in  $p$ .
  - That is, (almost) everyone in  $p$  only ever utters true sentences, and (almost) everyone trusts that (almost) everyone does so.
  - This is obviously highly idealized: The occasions quantified over by this description must be restricted to instances of cooperative communication.
- While I agree that such conventions play a central role in communication, I do think that the content of the convention(s) has to be slightly different.
  - In particular, I assume that such conventions mediate the form-force mapping.
  - So, there will be a convention of use that specifies that a speaker who utters an indicative  $p$  becomes committed to act as though (s)he believes  $p$ .
  - Similarly for other sentence types.
- Regarding the case at hand, we can also reformulate the ‘meaning’ of slack regulators like **proper** in terms of conventions of use.
- That is, I propose that there is a convention of use in the community of (most) speakers of English to the effect that:<sup>6</sup>

A speaker will use **proper**( $P$ ) in an utterance  $u$  only if (s)he takes even relatively small deviations from  $P$  to be relevant in the context of  $u$ .

<sup>6</sup>*Nota bene* that this differs from the characterization in the main text in that there is no mention of ‘signaling’ or anything of the kind.

- But how does signaling come about?
  - Let  $W$  be a hearer-information state (set of worlds the hearer takes to be possible).
  - Further, assume that the hearer assumes the speaker  $S$  to follow the above convention.
  - That is, all worlds  $w \in W$  are such that if  $S$  makes an utterance containing **proper**( $P$ ) in  $w$ , then, in  $w$ ,  $S$  takes even slight deviations from  $P$  to be relevant in the context of this utterance.
  - Now, the hearer observes an utterance (by  $S$ ) which contains **proper**( $P$ ).
  - He updates his information state with the information that  $S$  made this utterance.
  - It will then be the case, in all worlds in the updated information state, that the speaker takes even small deviations from  $P$  to be relevant in the context of his utterance.
- That is, the hearer learns something about the speaker, without this something being part of the asserted content.
- And yet, he learns this in virtue of linguistic convention (a particular kind, namely conventions of use).
- That is ‘signaling without asserting’ are cases in which the fact that a certain utterance was made has certain contextual entailments.
- This signaling-through-conventions view has many possible applications, e.g. it might just be the right thing to model what Horn (2002) calls ‘assertoric inertia’.
- While there does not yet exist a formal dynamic model of the right kind (in which updates are made to reflect which utterances have been made), it should be plausible that such a model can be given.