

ON THE PRAGMATICS OF PRAGMATIC SLACK*

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1 Introduction

Speakers often assert sentences that are not, strictly speaking, true. For example, there are many contexts in which of (1)–(3) can be blamelessly asserted, even though the indicated facts hold and are known to the speaker.

- (1) Mary was here by three.
Fact: Mary arrived at 3:02.
- (2) I am going to a conference in Berlin next week.
Fact: The conference is Potsdam, which abuts Berlin, but is not part of it.
- (3) There were five hundred people at the rally.
Fact: There were exactly 489 people at the rally.

Lasnik (1999) drew the attention of semanticists to this phenomenon of *loose talk*, or *pragmatic slack*, but he did not talk at all about the *pragmatics* of the phenomenon. He argued that pragmatic slack needs to be represented in the compositional semantics, on the grounds that there are operators that interact with it (what he calls SLACK REGULATORS), and proposed a modification of the felicity conditions on assertions to go with this compositional representation of slack, that is, he proposed an analysis of the *conventional* aspects of loose talk, remaining silent on the broadly Gricean, non-conventional aspects of the phenomenon.

This paper lays out the beginnings of an account of the pragmatic account of loose talk. Thus, while Lasnik was concerned with the question **When does linguistic convention permit a speaker to speak loosely?**, this paper instead asks **When will a speaker (be expected to) speak loosely?**

Examining the pragmatics of loose talk, besides being interesting in itself, is useful because loose talk is a phenomenon in which *the communicated content is weaker than the semantic content*, in the sense that the communicated content is asymmetrically entailed by the semantic content of the utterance. Virtually all well-studied pragmatic phenomena are cases of *pragmatic*

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strengthening, that is, cases in which the communicated content is *stronger* than the semantic content of the utterance. Examining cases of pragmatic weakening instead will allow us to ascertain whether semantic content has an effect that is independent from its contribution to communicated content. Obviously, cases of pragmatic strengthening will not help us to answer this question, for in these cases, semantic content is *part* of the communicated content, and thus any putative effect of semantic content could also be ascribed to the fact that this content is communicated.

And indeed, as we will see in Section 2, there is an effect of literal semantic content that is present even if this content is not communicated. This has implications for how we construe the basic force of assertions and other speech acts, laid out in Section 3. The paper concludes with demonstrating that our preliminary account of the pragmatics of loose talk presented in Section 4 can explain a number of reliable generalizations about the use of pragmatic slack.

2 Loose talk in discourse: A surprising observation

A natural first reaction to examples like the ones in (1)-(3) is to assume that the sentences simply can be *true* in the indicated circumstances, i.e., that **by three** is polysemous (or vague) and has a reading on which it means something like **around three** (and similarly for the other examples). This solution is attractive, because it let's us maintain the assumption that speakers generally feel compelled to speak truly, either by a felicity condition on assertions (such as Searle's (1969) SINCERITY CONDITION), a general convention of language use (such as Lewis's (1975) CONVENTION OF TRUTHFULNESS), or by a general pressure on cooperative behavior (such as Grice's (1975) MAXIM OF QUALITY).

Attractive as it may be, this solution cannot be right. Lasersohn convincingly argues that the sentences in question are *literally false* in the described circumstances, on the grounds that they cannot be conjoined with a more precise statement contradicting the 'strict' truth conditions:

- (4) # Mary was here by three, but she did not arrive until a few minutes after three.

If (1) had a reading on which it is literally true if Mary arrived a few minutes after three, (4) should be felicitous, but it is not. On the assumption that (1) always has very strict truth conditions, we can explain the infelicity of (4), because the sentence comes out as contradictory.

The fact that these sentences are *literally false* is what distinguishes loose talk from the *truth-conditional vagueness*, exhibited by predicates like **bald**: (5b) is perfectly coherent and can be felicitously uttered, indicating that (5a) can be literally true even if Homer has some hairs left.¹

- (5) a. Homer is bald.
b. Homer is bald, he has, like, three hairs left.

¹It has recently been argued that **bald** and other predicates referencing an upper-bounded scale are not vague in the same sense as predicates like **tall** are, which reference open scales. To distinguish the two phenomena, predicates like **bald** are said to allow for *imprecision*. While this may be adequate, I am not sure what to make of Kennedy and McNally's (2005) suggestion to treat this kind of imprecision as instances of loose talk in the sense of Lasersohn. The contrast in felicity between (5b) and (4) shows that these are not instances of the same phenomenon, and in particular suggests that (5a) can be *literally true* if Homer has hairs left.

2.1 Loose talk in multi-sentence discourses

Turning our attention to multi-sentence (and multi-turn) discourses, we find that an assertion that is only loosely true cannot be felicitously followed up by a more precise one without further ado:

- (6) (Yes,) Mary was here by three. # When she wasn't here five minutes after three, I got worried, but then she arrived in time.
- (7) A: I am going to this conference in Berlin.
B: Oh, where in Berlin is it held?
A: # In Potsdam (, which is just outside of Berlin).
- (8) A: Do we have enough coffee for the council meeting? How many people will be there?
B: Thirty.
A: Oh, great, then we'll have a quorum.
B: # No, because only 27 people will be there.

These discourses improve dramatically if we insert an expression that acknowledges the falsity of the previous assertion, such as **actually**:

- (9) (Yes,) Mary was here by three. Well, actually, she wasn't here until five minutes after three, and I got worried, but then she arrived in time.
- (10) A: I am going to this conference in Berlin.
B: Oh, where in Berlin is it held?
A: Actually, it is in Potsdam (, which is just outside of Berlin).
- (11) A: Do we have enough coffee for the council meeting? How many people will be there?
B: Thirty.
A: Oh, great, then we'll have a quorum.
B: No, because (I was speaking loose and) actually, only 27 people will be there.

At first glance, this may seem unsurprising: After all, we have just seen that there is good reason to believe that the first assertion in all these examples is *literally false* if the second one is true. So, of course, a speaker who wants to make the second assertion has to acknowledge this contradiction. Indeed, if the first assertion is appropriately hedged, no such acknowledgement is necessary:

- (12) (Yes,) Mary was here around three. When she wasn't here five minutes after three, I got worried, but then she arrived in time.
- (13) A: I am going to this conference in the Berlin area.
B: Oh, where is it held?
A: In Potsdam (, which is just outside of Berlin).
- (14) A: Do we have enough coffee for the council meeting? How many people will be there?
B: About thirty.
A: Oh, great, then we'll (likely) have a quorum.
B: No, because only 27 people will be there.

2.2 Mutually expected slack: A puzzling observation

The aim of this section is to convince you that the observation made in the previous section is, after all, quite surprising, at least in a large number of cases.

Consider (1), repeated below, in a context in which interlocutors expect a certain amount of slack, say $+/-$ 5 minutes. In such a context, the *communicated content* is weaker than the asserted content: What is communicated, that is, what the audience comes to believe if it trusts the speaker, and what the speaker intends his audience to come to believe, is the proposition expressed by (16).

(15) Mary was here by three. =(1)
Fact: Mary arrived at 3:02.

(16) Mary was here by some time between 2:55 and 3:05.

Nota bene that the proposition expressed by (16) is *true* if Mary arrived at 3:02, unlike the asserted content of (15). Crucially, even in this situation, a speaker must acknowledge the falsity of his first assertion if he wants to follow up with a more precise statement:

- (17) (Yes,) Mary was here by three.
 a. # When she wasn't here by 3:01, I got worried ...
 b. ✓ Well, actually, she wasn't here until a few minutes after. When she wasn't here ...

This is indeed very surprising. Given that what is communicated by the first utterance is the weak proposition expressed by (16), why should the discourse not be able to proceed as if this sentence had been uttered?

To reiterate: The speaker uttered (15), intending to communicate something along the lines of (16). The hearer correctly recognized this intention, and communication succeeded. All parties are in agreement that (16) is what has been communicated. *And yet*, the speaker cannot simply proceed as if this was what he said, he has to acknowledge the falsity of his statement using **actually** or something similar, *even though no party to the conversation considers the false proposition to have been communicated*. This is what I meant when I said, in the introduction, that examining cases in which communicated content is weaker than the asserted content can unveil important and surprising facts about literal meaning: *Prima facie*, it is plausible to assume that all effects that semantic meaning has in an utterance are due to its contribution to communicated content: On its own, semantic meaning is inert, only in being employed to convey a certain communicated content does it have an effect.

But we have seen that this is not so: Literal (semantic) content has an effect beyond its contribution to the determination of communicated content. If this were not so, there would be no reason to acknowledge the literal falsity of a prior assertion if the content communicated with this assertion was true.

3 The essential effects of utterances of declaratives

In order to explain the somewhat puzzling observations made in the last section, I adopt Condoravdi and Lauer's (2011) proposal, which can be seen as a generalization 'commitment slate'-based approaches (cf. Hamblin (1971), Gunlogson (2003)):

The basic idea is that the recursive system of grammar compositionally determines (often jointly with context) a certain semantic object (say, an intensional proposition for declaratives; a

set of those for interrogatives), and, in addition to that, there are *conventions of use* that specify the effect of uttering a sentence of a particular type (or, a sentence with a particular type of denotation). Of particular relevance is, of course, the convention specifying the effect of declaratives:

(18) **Declarative Convention**

When a speaker utters a declarative *S* with denotation $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$ in a context *c*, he thereby commits himself to act as though he believes that $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$ is true.

For the purposes of this paper, I will stick with this informal natural language statement of the Declarative Convention. See Condoravdi and Lauer (2011, in progress) for a formalization of the relevant notion of ‘acting as though one believes’ and ‘being committed to act in a certain way’.

I want to briefly contrast this conception with two popular alternatives:

Compositionality All The Way There are (usually silent) ‘illocutionary operators’ in the syntax or logical form which, somehow, specify illocutionary effects of the utterance (Ross, 1970, Sadock, 1974, Davis, 2009, Trinh and Crnič, 2011, Krifka, 2001)².

Pragmatic Determination Of Force The recursive system of grammar only determines a semantic object, and it is up to properly pragmatic processes to guide the hearer to the intended effect (Portner, 2005, Kaufmann, 2012)³.

The architecture advocated here (which is implicit in Condoravdi and Lauer (2011)) is an intermediate position between these two extremes: It agrees **Compositionality All The Way** approaches that the form-force mapping is a matter of (semantic) convention, but it sides with **Pragmatic Determination Of Force** approaches in insisting that semantic composition ends at the sentence level. That is, embodied in the architecture is the assumption that *conventional meaning is not exhausted by compositional meaning*: There are semantic conventions that are not part of the system of compositional interpretation.

One crucial aspect of the Declarative Convention as formulated in (18) is that it specifies *commitments* as the conventional consequences of assertions, i.e., the Declarative Convention is essentially normative in character. Hence, the Declarative Convention cannot be a convention in the sense of Lewis (1969): Lewis-conventions are mere regularities in behavior, and as such do not give rise to commitments in any direct way. von Savigny (1988) proposes a notion of commitment that is adequately normative, and also applies it to mediate the form-force mapping.⁴

Space prevents me from establishing here that my proposed conception is superior to the alternatives. I do want to note, however, that the **Compositionality All The Way** approach, in principle, could be made to match the predictions relevant to the present paper, if the illocutionary operators in question can be linked up with commitments in the correct way. The same does not

²While early instantiations of this view (Ross’s (1970) ‘Performative Hypothesis’) have been largely rejected (see, e.g. Sadock (2004) for an overview of early refutations), more recent versions of this view generally avoid the pitfalls of the early ones (but see Trinh and Crnič (2011) for a very traditional implementation).

³Many earlier accounts could be described as adhering to this view, but few are as explicit about their ambition as Portner and Kaufmann. These two authors implement the basic idea in very different ways, and, to my mind, Portner’s implementation ends up invoking a set of structures that need to be assumed to exist by convention. For reasons of space, I will not argue this point here.

⁴Indeed, von Savigny (1988) (and with him, Heim (1977)) can be seen as an early proponent of the ‘extra-compositional convention’ view of the form-force mapping advocated here. However, the *content* of his convention for declaratives is quite different from the Declarative Convention.

seem to be true for **Pragmatic Determination Of Force** accounts: If the effects of an utterance are exhausted by what arises pragmatically, it seems that the effects of an utterance need to be confined to the communicated content. However, as we saw in the previous section, the literal semantic content of an utterance has an effect even when the communicated content diverges from it.

Finally, a note on the content of the Declarative Convention, i.e. on the content of the commitments it specifies: Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) show that, assuming this particular content, a very simple and attractive account of explicit performatives is possible. In principle, however, their account would be workable even if the commitment to act as though $[[S]]^c$ is true were only a secondary effect that arises (in context) on the basis of a different essential effect of declaratives (though this secondary effect would have to be guaranteed at least on all occasions of the utterance of an explicit performative). The considerations in the present paper strongly favor the view that the Declarative Convention in (18) indeed specifies the essential effect of declaratives that is always present. This is so because the content of the Declarative Convention will be instrumental in explaining the discourse constraints on loose talk.

4 The pragmatics of pragmatic slack

4.1 Modeling the discourse constraint

Given the hypothesis advanced in the previous section, it should be clear how the discourse constraint discussed in Section 2 is to be accounted for: Among the actions that are subject to the commitment created with an assertion are the speaker's linguistic actions. Further, asserting something that is (contextually) incompatible with p is surely not a way of acting as though one believes that p . Even more seriously, the second assertion will create a commitment of its own, so a speaker of (6), repeated below for convenience, would commit himself to both the claim that Mary was there by three and that she was not.

- (19) (Yes,) Mary was here by three. ...# When she wasn't here five minutes after three, I got worried, but then she arrived in time. = (6)

It surely is never a wise move to commit oneself to act as though one believed in a contradiction, for this would mean committing oneself to act irrationally.

In this view of things, what items like **actually** do in these discourses is rescinding commitment incurred by the previous, contradictory assertion: The speaker indicates that his new assertion is supposed to 'replace' the previous one: That is, he rescinds the earlier commitment and incurs a new one, all with one utterance. It should be stressed that the commitments we are talking about here are, in most normal contexts, very 'cheap': The speaker can easily rescind them. But rescind them, he must, if he wants to make another assertion that is incompatible with them.

4.2 The risky nature of loose talk

We are now in the position to examine the (broadly Gricean) pragmatics of loose talk. As pointed out in the introduction, this means asking a very different question from the one that Lasnik (1999) concerned himself with. He asked **When is a speaker licensed to assert something that is literally false (or not known to be literally true)?** Instead, when investigating the pragmatics of loose talk, we ask **When will a speaker (be expected to) speak loosely?** The short answer to

this question is: When he thinks he can get away with it, when he does not expect ill effects from his loose assertion. That is, in deciding whether to speak loosely, a speaker has to ask himself two distinct questions:

Question 1 Does making this utterance that I know to be false (or do not know to be true) suit my *immediate conversational goals*?

Question 2 Will committing myself to something that is not strictly true (or that I am not certain is strictly true) get me into trouble later?

4.2.1 Question 1: Immediate conversational goals

Question 1 is what is addressed in many of the recent game-theoretic accounts of pragmatic reasoning (Parikh (2001), van Rooij (2003), Ross (2006), Benz and van Rooij (2007), Jäger (2007), Franke (2009), among others): By assumption, assertions are made to serve certain (immediate) goals, represented by means of a utility function. Game-theoretic reasoning determines which is the optimal move to make, given these goals. The relevant kind of game situation in the case of loose talk is what is sometimes called *White Lie* scenarios (Franke, 2008):

Assume a standard signaling situation with three (kinds of) worlds (w_1, w_2, w_3), two receiver actions a_{13} and a_2 and three messages (m_1, m_2, m_3). As usual, the sender S knows the true state of the world, and he can send one of the three messages to the receiver R before the receiver chooses which of the two actions to perform. Further, assume an extrinsically given denotation function $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$ that is such that $\llbracket m_i \rrbracket = \{w_i\}$ for all i , and that the preferences of speaker and hearer are such that $a_{13} > a_2$ in both w_1, w_2 and $a_2 > a_{13}$ in w_2 . Finally, assume that m_1 is slightly cheaper to send for S than m_3 : Both messages have cost, which gets subtracted from S 's payoff, but the cost of m_3 is slightly higher than that of m_1 .

In this situation, if a speaker thinks that his messages will be 'believed', he will send m_1 in both w_1 and w_3 —even though in the latter case, what he says is 'literally false' (i.e. $w_3 \notin \llbracket m_1 \rrbracket$).

This may seem like a problematic prediction, and it is one that any game-theoretic account makes, unless 'saying something that is untrue' is excluded (or punished with high cost) by stipulation. I want to suggest that this prediction, in itself, is not very problematic: These are simply cases in which **Question 1** has a positive answer. With respect to the example scenario, assume that $m_1 = \mathbf{Mary\ was\ here\ by\ three}$, $m_2 = \mathbf{Mary\ was\ here\ by\ four}$ and $m_3 = \mathbf{Mary\ was\ here\ by\ 3:02}$ —on this assumption, the prediction does not seem too problematic anymore.

4.2.2 Question 2: The enduring effect of commitments

Question 2 is unanswered by one-shot game scenarios. If it is to be treated at all in a game-theoretic setting, one would have to move to the theory of repeated games—something that no pragmaticist has done so far.

Note that the 'trouble' referenced in Question 2 may, on occasion, be only very slight: The cost of rescinding a commitment is often quite small. It may be small, but it still exists: At the very least, it will, however briefly, interrupt the smooth flow of conversation. In addition, even in low-stakes contexts, a speaker who has to go back on his commitments all too often will risk to annoy his audiences: Imagine a speaker always speaking with a generous amount of slack, and

then rescind the commitments. After a while, such a person will not be regarded as a very pleasant conversant.

To a first approximation (and that is all we need at present), we can say that a speaker will not speak loosely *if he takes it to be unlikely that the strict truth will become relevant later*. So Question 2 is about expectations of future relevance, while Question 1 is about present relevance.

What Question 2 brings to the fore is the fact that loose talk is *risky*: There will (almost) always be a non-zero chance of the strict truth becoming relevant later, and there will always be a non-zero cost to be paid if it does.

That is to say, the fact that assertions create commitments translates into a *pragmatic pressure to stay 'close' to the truth*. Speaking loosely, and other 'white lie' utterances will only be made if the speaker has reason to do so: If there is nothing to gain from talking loosely, taking on the risk is not worth it.⁵

4.2.3 Reasons for employing loose talk

Benefits of speaking loosely come in many forms: For one thing, there are the usual 'manner' reasons: The loose assertion may be shorter, easier to produce, or simply more standard than the strict one. Similarly, the shorter expression may be preferable on other grounds, such as cognitive economy, processing cost, or even politeness.

Finally, a loose assertion may be preferable precisely because the hearer expects a certain amount of looseness: In this case, being very exact may well trigger unwanted inferences on part of the hearer, as he will infer a reason why the more precise statement is relevant. The last is a kind of meta-pragmatic reasoning that I think plays a role in many cases of loose talk.

Being very precise will only trigger these unwanted inferences, of course, if the hearer picks up on the speaker's intended exactness. It is here where the facts discussed by Krifka (2002, 2006) come into play: In the domain of number terms, there is a tendency to interpret 'round' numbers as approximate and 'non-round' numbers as precise. Hence employing a precise number will indicate that the speaker intends to communicate that his assertion is strictly true. Krifka's (2006) account is largely compatible with what I have laid out in this paper, seeing as it is mostly concerned with how *communicated* content is determined if there is a possibility of 'loose interpretation'. A fully integrated version of the two proposals must be deferred to a later occasion.

5 The pragmatics of loose talk: Three predictions

While an investigation of the pragmatics of loose talk may be interesting in itself, ideally, we want to be able to use it to predict reliable generalizations about the use of loose talk. And indeed, there are such generalizations, which our account of the pragmatics, preliminary as it may be, can help explain. All three of these are generalizations that Lasersohn's unamended account cannot explain.

⁵Note that the game-theoretic approaches, by themselves, will not predict such an incentive to speak the truth, even if the true signal (m_3) and the false signal (m_1) are not associated with different costs: In this case, the game-theoretic accounts predict that the sender will be ambivalent which message to send: He may send the true one just as much as the false one, unless a basic preference for the truth is built into the game situation.

Now, of course, a game-theoretical account may stipulate such a (weak) preference for the truth and justify it on the grounds discussed here, that is, because there are (game-extrinsic) consequences of making assertions. This may be adequate for modeling some phenomena, but it would still be a stipulation, which is legitimate only based on the considerations like the ones we are investigating in the present paper.

Before laying out these generalizations, and showing how the present account can explain them, I need to briefly recap the basic facts about Lasersohn's account, so as to be able to explain why his account (without a pragmatic amendment) does not predict these generalizations: Lasersohn proposes a novel dimension of meaning: Every expression has a 'pragmatic halo', which is a set of semantic objects of the same type as the denotation of the expression. Atomic expressions get their halos assigned by the context, and the halo of complex expressions get determined compositionally from the halos of the constituents of the expression. A sentence will thus end up with a halo that is a set of propositions, which is to be thought of as those propositions that come 'close enough for practical purposes' to the proposition expressed by the sentence. A sentence is only assertable if its pragmatic halo contains at least one true sentence (and thus the proposition expressed by the sentence 'comes close enough to the truth for practical purposes').

5.1 No spurious loose talk

This prediction has been mentioned already in the last section: On the assumption that loose talk gives rise to strict commitments, a speaker will need an incentive to speak loosely. And indeed, we see this constraint reflected in some hard and fast regularities of language use.

Suppose *A* and *B* are in a context in which all that matters is what country *A* is from. *A* is from Germany, more specifically, from Frankfurt am Main. *A* cannot (or at least, will not (be expected to)) answer *B*'s question as in (20).

- (20) *B*: Where are you from?
A: (I am) From Berlin.

Note that *A*'s answer would entail the relevant answer to *B*'s question (that *A* is from Germany) and, by hypothesis, that is all that matters in the context at hand. And yet, *A* cannot give this answer. On Lasersohn's unamended account, this is not explained: Recall that all that matters is that one of the propositions in the 'halo' of the asserted sentence is true. Given that all that matters is the country *A* is from, we presumably can assume that \llbracket I am from Berlin \rrbracket^c is in this halo. And yet, *A*'s answer is not felicitous, or at least unexpected, if she is from Frankfurt.

On the present account of the pragmatics of loose talk, this is explained by the availability of alternative expressions that are equally short/standard/easy to process etc., *viz.*, (21a,b):⁶

- (21) a. I am from Frankfurt.
 b. I am from Germany.

That is, there simply is no incentive for *A* to speak so loosely as to say she is from Berlin, and hence she should not and will not do so (and hence is not expected to do so). Furthermore, it will be, in most contexts, quite likely that the difference between Frankfurt and Berlin (which are ca. 340 miles apart) will become relevant in the future.

Of course, in order to deal with facts such as these, Lasersohn could stipulate that 'coming close enough to the truth for practical purposes' is sensitive to the possible future relevance of the difference between loose and strict content. However, here, we are interested in illuminating what counts as 'close enough to the truth': Namely, what a speaker thinks he can 'get away with'.

⁶Additional considerations will determine which of these *A* will select. She may opt for (21b), for example, if she is not sure that *B* knows that Frankfurt is in Germany. On the other hand, she might opt for (21a) if she thinks that the more precise location will become relevant shortly.

5.2 Contradictions are always infelicitous

This generalization may seem patently obvious: Contradictions are never felicitous (unless interpreted as instances of insincere or figurative language use). However, given his setup, Lasersohn notes that he is in a predicament: He does not predict that this is so.

On his account, a contradiction should be assertable, if only its halo contains a true proposition. This is quite possible, and indeed quite likely, in the very cases that inspired his account: Reconsider (4), repeated here for convenience.

(22) # Mary was here by three, but she did not arrive until a few minutes after three. = (4)

Given how halos arise in composition, this should be felicitous if only the halo of the sub-expression **May was here by three** has in its halo propositions saying that Mary arrived a few minutes after three. Lasersohn bites the bullet and claims that such sentences are not infelicitous because they are contradictions. Instead he suggests that they are infelicitous because the speaker implicitly shifts the standards of precision in the middle of the utterance.

I don't think this solution works in general. After all, sentences like (4) are perfectly fine with a hedged expression in the first sentence—if only the context is right:

(23) A: Was Mary here around three?

B: She was here around three, but she did not arrive until a few minutes after (three).

On the present account, however, it is guaranteed that contradictions always come out as infelicitous: This is so because it is never rational to commit oneself to act as though one believes in a contradiction.

5.3 There are no ('pure') slack widenings

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of the account of the pragmatics of loose talk sketched here is that it explains a rather curious asymmetry with respect to what Lasersohn calls SLACK REGULATORS. Slack regulators are Lasersohn's main reason to include his pragmatic halos in the system of semantic composition: They are expressions like **on the dot** in (24) and **proper** in (25):

(24) Mary was here by three o'clock on the dot.

(25) Mary lives in Berlin proper.

Recall that Lasersohn argued (convincingly) that **Mary was here by three o'clock** already has the strictest possible truth conditions. If this is so, we cannot but conclude that **on the dot** is truth-conditionally vacuous in this sentence, even though it may appear that it strengthens the assertion by making the predication more strict.

Of course, **on the dot** still has an influence on the interpretation: In terms of loose talk, we can state its contribution as signaling that the sentence is to be interpreted with less slack than it otherwise would (or, in Lasersohn's terms, that its felicity conditions are met even with respect to less slack than would otherwise be expected). Lasersohn models this by assuming that, in terms of truth-conditional content, these 'slack regulators' denote the identity function, and only in the 'halo dimension', they have a non-trivial effect: They serve to restrict the halos by excluding elements that are 'farther from the truth', resulting in a smaller set of propositions on the sentence level.

An interesting generalization, noticed already by Lasersohn himself, is that while there are numerous slack regulators like **on the dot** and **proper** that are truth-conditionally vacuous but

restrict the halo of the expression they combine with, there do not appear to be any slack regulators that are truth-conditionally vacuous but *extend* the halo of the expression they combine with. That is, there are no ‘slack wideners’, there are only ‘slack tightenners’.

Of course, there are expressions that force a looser interpretation of a sentence—namely, hedges. However, hedges *always* have truth-conditional effect: They always weaken the asserted proposition. We have seen examples illustrating this fact already:

(26) *B*: She was here around three, but she did not arrive until a few minutes after (three).

Suppose for a moment that **around** worked like slack tightenners do, i.e. that **around** is truth-conditionally vacuous, but only adds to the expected/allowed amount of slack, indicating that the expression is only loosely true. Then (26) should be just as infelicitous as (4), for it, too, would express a contradiction. So **around** cannot be a slack widener (or at least, it cannot be a ‘pure’ slack widener, i.e. be truth-conditionally vacuous). This observation generalizes: At least in English, there do not seem to be *any* slack wideners that do not impact truth-conditional content. Lasersohn admits that he has no explanation why this should be so, as in his system, slack wideners are just as natural to define as slack tightenners.

We can, again, explain this generalization pragmatically: I claim that if such expressions existed, there would be no context in which they could be rationally used (which we may capture by saying that these would be ‘pragmatically contradictory’). Here is why: Slack wideners increase the length and complexity of the sentences they occur in. Hence, a speaker should have a reason for using them. That is, a speaker who uses a slack widener takes the difference between the truth-conditional content of the sentence and the (near-by) truth to be relevant (for otherwise, why does he feel the need to signal that the sentence is only loosely true?). At the same time, he chooses an expression that leaves the commitment he incurs untouched, i.e. he commits himself to the strict truth. This would only be a rational move if he does *not* take the difference between the loose content and the strict content to be relevant.

Obviously, both conditions cannot be true of the same context: Either the speaker takes the deviation from the truth to be relevant, or he does not. This means that, at least in the presence of truth-conditional hedges, a speaker never would use a pure slack widener. So even if we assume that a language, say, by official decree, were suddenly to have pure slack wideners, these would never be used (or, more likely, they would be reinterpreted as truth-conditional hedges).

While it is still an open question whether the declarative convention (18) is valid in all speech communities, it is quite conceivable, if not likely, that it is. If so, our explanation of the non-existence of slack-wideners constitutes the explanation of a substantive linguistic universal on pragmatic grounds.

6 Conclusion

This paper has explored the pragmatics of loose talk and proposed a preliminary analysis of it. This account has been shown to explain reliable generalizations about pragmatic slack that had previously been unaccounted for. At the same time, the investigation of pragmatic slack, as a phenomenon in which the communicated content is weaker than the semantic content of the utterance, has been shown to provide crucial evidence for deciding between various proposals of the essential effect of declarative utterances: We have seen that the essential effect must be such that the effect of literal semantic meaning goes beyond its contribution to communicated content.

It was further shown that the discourse constraints on loose talk can be straightforwardly explained on the assumption that the essential effect of declaratives is that proposed by Condoravdi and Lauer (2011).

Much remains to be done. Firstly, it would be preferable to have an explicit, formal account of the pragmatics of loose talk, perhaps in a framework like that of Beaver (2002), ideally integrating what has been proposed here with the work of Krifka (2006). Secondly, this paper has focussed exclusively on loose talk in utterances of declaratives. Other sentence types should be investigated to see whether they allow for looseness in the same sense, and what discourse constraints arise from loose talk in these. Thirdly, it should be investigated whether the discourse effects of loose talk investigated here hold cross-linguistically, and, consequently, whether the Declarative Convention stipulated in this paper applies for other languages as well. Finally, now that we have the beginnings of an account of the pragmatics of loose talk, we may wonder whether a purely pragmatic account of loose talk is possible, dispensing with Lasersohn's (1999) 'halo' dimension. The crucial challenge here is to develop an adequate account of the semantics of slack regulators, which seem to crucially interact with the system of semantic composition. I think such an account can be given, allowing us to treat loose talk as just another instance of speaker's asserting things they do not believe to be true (others include lying, bullshitting and 'you know what I mean' uses). The development of such an account, however, has to await another occasion.

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