On the pragmatics of pragmatic slack*

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Preview

· Loose talk and literal truth: Some counterintuitive observations.

· Loose talk creates strict commitments.

· This has repercussions for the pragmatics of loose talk.

· Repercussions that help explain some as-yet unexplained generalizations.

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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:[1]

(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' were just 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** <u>always</u> 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 <u>literally false</u>.

· And yet, (4) may be blamelessly asserted—this is what Lasersohn (1999) calls PRAGMATIC SLACK.

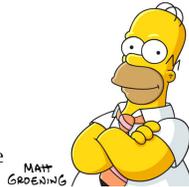---

[1](5b) is a variant of Lasersohn's example 37.

1.1 Pragmatic Slack vs. Vagueness

· The contrast in (5) shows that pragmatic slack is distinct from <u>truth-conditional vagueness</u>, 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 <u>literally true</u> if Homer has some hairs left.

1.2 Slack regulators

· I have argued 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, <u>never</u> 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 <u>with respect to Berlin</u> (e.g. John could not be from Potsdam).

  – But it does not take away the possibility of speaking loosely <u>with respect to San Francisco</u> (e.g. John could be living in San Bruno or Oakland, given the right context).

1.3 Lasersohn's account: Weakening felicity conditions on assertions

· 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, <u>atomic expressions get their halos assigned by the context</u>.

· Lasersohn then proposes to modify the felicity conditions on assertions:

  – **Classical version**(?): A speaker can/should only assert ϕ if he believes / has adequate evidence for ϕ.

  – **New version**: A speaker can/should only assert ϕ if he believes / has adequate evidence for <u>one of the propositions in the halo of ϕ</u>.

· Lasersohn is concerned with the <u>conventional</u> felicity conditions on assertions and the <u>conventional</u> semantics of slack regulators.

· This talks is more about the <u>pragmatics</u> of loose assertions, i.e. the <u>non-conventional</u> aspects of pragmatic slack.

> **Lasersohn** When can a speaker felicitously utter a sentence he does not know to be true?
>
> **Lauer** When will a speaker (be expected to) 'speak loosely'?

1.4 Something to set aside: Krifka's (2006) approximate interpretation of number words

· Observation: With numbers, more slack is expected (and hence usually employed) for 'round' numbers, which usually are expressed with shorter words (10, 20, 30 . . .).

· Krifka (2002, 2006) gives an account of this in an optimality/game-theoretic framework.

· The pragmatic pressures Krifka investigates ultimately interact with the considerations presented here.

· To a considerable extent, however, they are orthogonal.

· Krifka explains how non-round number terms can serve as slack regulators by themselves.

2 The pragmatics of loose talk

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

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

(10) 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.)

(11) 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.

Weird!

· Suppose it is commonly presupposed that the speaker will speak with a certain amount of slack, say +/- 5 minutes.

· Then:

   – The speaker says: "Mary arrived at four."

   – The hearer comes to believe: "Mary arrived between 3:55 and 4:05."

   – The speaker meaning: "Mary arrived between 3:55 and 4:05."

· **Naïve idea:** The discourse should proceed as if the speaker had uttered the weaker proposition.

   – In particular, the speaker should feel free to give more precise information, as if he had said something like 'Mary arrived around four.'

· **Actual fact**: The speaker is not free to do so, he has to acknowledge that his previous assertion was false.

2.1 Modeling the constraint

· With Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) (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 $.p$ <u>commits the speaker to act as though (s)he believes p</u>.

· See Condoravdi and Lauer (2011) 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:

(12) If a speaker (sincerely) utters an indicative $.p$, he cannot (without overt retraction of $.p$), utter anything that is (contextually) incompatible with p.

· <u>Note:</u> The sense in which 'commitment' is used here is a weak one—in most contexts, assertions can be easily retracted, esp. if there were good reasons to make the first assertion. But they <u>do</u> have to be retracted.

2.2 Sidebar: The very conception of conventional meaning

· I think the above considerations and the proposed solution shed some light on some theoretical questions.

· In particular: <u>What is primary: Speaker meaning or conventional (semantic) meaning?</u>

   – **View 1** (Grice 1957) Non-natural speaker meaning is all that matters, conventional meaning is only a convenient way to non-naturally mean things.

   – **View 2** (Lewis 1969) Conventions are crucial for natural language meaning, they play a role beyond enabling speaker meaning.

The facts reviewed above suggest that **View 2** is more adequate: Conventional (or semantic) meaning plays a role even if speaker meaning diverges from it.

· Sidebar to the sidebar: Lewis-conventions will actually not do for modeling the effects of sentence types like the indicative, because they are not <u>sufficiently normative</u>.

2.3 Getting away with ~~murder~~ taking on a commitment

- So, When will a speaker 'speak loosely'?

- When he thinks he can get away with it.

When a speaker is speaking loosely, (s)he

- either says something (s)he knows to be literally false (e.g. saying (13), knowing that John lives in Potsdam)

- or says something that (s)he is not certain is literally true (e.g. saying (13), knowing only that John lives somewhere in the Berlin area).

(13)   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_{13}, 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.)

2.4 Formalization: Some programmatic remarks

· How could the informal remarks from the previous section be formalized.

· Here is a way:

   – Define an update-style dynamic system.

   – Have the information states represent higher-order information such as agent's beliefs, preferences, and action-choices.

   – Instead of updating with the content of utterances (as in dynamic semantics), update with information about utterance events, e.g.

   (14) $I[utter(s, u, \phi)] = J$
       read: information state I updated with the information that s uttered u with content ϕ is J

   – <u>Nota bene</u>: $utter(s, u, \phi)$ does not represent a sentence in the language employed by the agents we are modeling. It rather represents perceptual information an agent receives.

· This is inspired by (and takes to the extreme) the classical Stalnaker (1978) picture. Szabolcsi (1982) made an early attempt to model speech acts as updating the world. See also Zeevat (1997) for a similar model.

· With a setup like this, we can go to work and characterize the set of contexts in which certain utterances (e.g. utterances with a certain amount of slack, with a slack regulator …) will be optimal/expected moves.

· This way we can give formal content to context descriptions like those in the previous section.

· And we can make stringent predictions about when certain pragmatic inferences arise.

3 Reaping the benefits

> Lasersohn's unamended account fails to predict some basic facts about loose talk. Here I will concentrate on three of those:
>
> (i) There are general restrictions on the amount of slack speakers employ.
>
> (ii) Contradictions are always infelicitous.
>
> (iii) 'Pure slack wideners' do not exist.

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(i) There are general restrictions on the amount of slack speaker (are assumed to) employ

The facts

Even in very permissive contexts, there are limits to the amount of slack a speaker may employ.

   · Sven is from Frankfurt (loosely speaking).

   · Suppose we are in a context in which all that matters is what country Sven is from.

   · Sven cannot say (15) to provide this information

(15)   I am from Berlin.

   · This is so, presumably, because there are equally complex/long/standard etc. forms he could have uttered without employing slack (e.g. **I am from Germany** or **I am from Frankfurt**).

   · Indeed, there is a pressure to avoid pragmatic slack, in the following sense:

> **Avoid loose talk!** If a speaker can avoid speaking loosely by using an equally appropriate form, he should do so.

Why Lasersohn does not predict this

   · Lasersohn does not discuss how halos emerge from the context.

   · He assumes, though, that the context is all that matters for the assignment of halos.

   · On Lasersohn's unamended account, there does not seem to be a downside to speaking loosely.

How the pragmatic account does

   · Recall that, on the present account, loose talk is <u>risky</u>.

   · 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.).

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(ii) Contradictions are always infelicitous.

The facts

· Contradictions are always infelicitous (unless we are dealing with non-literal speech, as in metaphor).

Why Lasersohn does not predict this

· Given his set-up, Lasersohn points out that he is in a predicament:

– Logical contradictions are not necessarily predicted to be 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.

(16)   Did Mary arrive at three?
    a.   #Mary did arrive at three, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.
    b.   Mary did arrive three-ish, but she did not arrive until slightly after three.

How the pragmatic account does

· It is never a good idea to commit yourself to act as though you believed in a contradiction.

· For that means committing yourself to act irrationally.

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

The facts

· Recall that slack regulators like **on the dot**, **exactly** (on its slack regulation use) and **proper** do not have truth-conditional impact.

· Instead, they only interact with Lasersohn's halos and/or signal that the speaker takes small deviations from the strict truth to be relevant.

· Note that all of these regulators are <u>slack removers</u>: They <u>reduce</u> the amount of allowable/expected slack.

· What about slack regulators that <u>increase</u> the amount of allowable/expected slack?

· Operators that do this, i.e. hedges like **-ish**, **around**, **roughly**, etc. <u>always</u> have truth-conditional impact and thus weaken the commitment the speaker undertakes.

· What is the reason for this asymmetry?

Why Lasersohn does not predict this

· On Lasersohn's account, this is curious: A 'halo widener' should is just as natural to define in his system as a 'halo tightener'.

· Lasersohn admits that he has no explanation for why there should be such an asymmetry between tighteners and wideners.

How the present account does

· I claim that if such a hypothetical pure slack-widener would exist, it would never be used.

· Here is what would have to be the case if a speaker were to use such an operator:

– The speaker must have a reason for using the slack widener.

    ∗ He must take small deviations from the strict truth to be relevant (otherwise he could just use the plain form of the sentence).

    ∗ And he must at least doubt that the sentence is not strictly true.

– At the same time, since the hypothetical operator does not have truth conditional impact, the speaker commits himself to the strict truth.

– No moderately rational speaker would do this.

· Upshot: On the conception presented here, slack wideners would be pragmatically self-defeating.

- Prediction: At least in the presence of truth-conditional weakeners, such slack wideners would never be used, and vanish from the language.

- Alternatively, they may be reinterpreted as truth-conditional weakeners.

4 Conclusion

- There are reliable generalizations that can (and should) be explained by investigating the pragmatics of loose talk.

- An adequate treatment of the pragmatics necessitates looking beyond one-shot interactions.

- This is so because assertions made while talking loosely still create <u>enduring commitments to the strict truth of the sentence</u>.

  - This can be viewed as <u>a vindication of truth-conditional semantics</u> 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', <u>truth-conditions still matter</u>, namely with respect to the public commitments

The future

- Formalization.

- Is a <u>purely pragmatic</u> account of loose talk viable? That is, can we dispense with Lasersohn's halo dimension?

  - Crucial problem: Slack regulators.

  - Idea: Assume that these non-compositionally signal that slight deviations from their complement are relevant.

(17)   at three o'clock on the dot
       $\simeq$ at three o'clock & SIGNAL: slight deviations from three o'clock are relevant

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