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MEANING IN INTERACTION

AN INTRODUCTION
TO PRAGMATICS

JENNY THOMAS

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Meaning in Interaction: an Introduction to Pragmatics

Jenny Thom

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**This book is dedicated with love and gratitude to my
mother, Audrey, and to the memory of my father, Maurice.**

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Preface

Pragmatics is a relatively new area of linguistics and until recently there were no introductory texts available. Now, in response to the growing interest in the field in colleges and universities, a number of introductory books have appeared, each somewhat different in orientation. Marcelo Dascal (1983) offers a first class introduction to the field from the standpoint of the philosophy of language. Georgia Green (1989) provides a very accessible introduction, with particular emphasis on textual pragmatics and more formal aspects of pragmatics. Diane Blakemore (1992) takes a cognitive approach, firmly rooted within relevance theory, to which she offers an excellent introduction, while Jacob Mey (1993) approaches the subject from a social point of view.

So what makes this book distinctive? Firstly, it accords a central place to the roles of both speaker and hearer in the construction of meaning and takes account of both social and psychological factors in the generation and interpretation of utterances. Secondly, it covers basic concepts in considerable detail, drawing particular attention to problems in early work in pragmatics. Thirdly, it brings the reader right up to date with current issues in pragmatics. The theoretical points are illustrated with copious authentic examples taken from the media, fiction and real-life interactions.

Although I have presupposed that the reader will have no previous knowledge of pragmatics, I have presumed that he or she will be familiar with some basic linguistic terms and concepts.

Jenny Thomas
Lancaster,
February 1995.

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What is pragmatics?

1.1 Introduction

People do not always or even usually say what they mean. Speakers frequently mean much more than their words actually say. For example, I might say: *It's hot in here!*, but what I mean is: *Please open the window!* or *Is it all right if I open the window?* or *You're wasting electricity!* People can mean something quite different from what their words say, or even just the opposite. For instance, to someone who has borrowed my car for the weekend and returned it with no petrol in the tank, I might say: *It was nice of you to fill the car up!* or *What a shame you couldn't find the petrol tank!*

Several interesting questions arise from these observations: if speakers regularly mean something other than what they say, how is it that people manage (as on the whole they do) to understand one another? If a single group of words such as *It's hot in here!* could mean so many different things at different times, how do we work out what it actually does mean on one specific occasion? And why don't people just say what they mean? These, and many other issues, are addressed within the area of linguistics known as pragmatics.

In this introductory chapter I shall explain the way in which the term *pragmatics* will be used in this book and I shall outline the sort of work which is carried out under the heading of pragmatics.

1.2 Defining pragmatics

In the early 1980s, when it first became common to discuss pragmatics in general textbooks on linguistics, the most common definitions of pragmatics were: **meaning in use** or **meaning in**

2 Meaning in interaction

context. Although these definitions are accurate enough and perfectly adequate as a starting point, they are too general for our purposes — for example, there are aspects of semantics, particularly semantics of the type developed since the late 1980s,¹ which could well come under the headings of meaning in use or meaning in context. More up-to-date textbooks tend to fall into one of two camps — those who equate pragmatics with **speaker meaning**² and those who equate it with **utterance interpretation**³ (they do not necessarily use these terms explicitly). Certainly each of these definitions captures something of the work now undertaken under the heading of pragmatics, but neither of them is entirely satisfactory. Moreover, they each represent radically different approaches to the sub-discipline of pragmatics. The term *speaker meaning* tends to be favoured by writers who take a broadly **social**⁴ view of the discipline; it puts the focus of attention firmly on the **producer** of the message, but at the same time obscures the fact that the process of interpreting what we hear involves moving between several levels of meaning. The final definition (*utterance interpretation*), which is favoured by those who take a broadly **cognitive** approach, avoids this fault, but at the cost of focusing too much on the **receiver** of the message, which in practice means largely ignoring the social constraints on utterance production. I am not going to undertake an exhaustive discussion of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two competing approaches just now — this task will be done at appropriate points in later chapters. But we can begin to understand the differences between the two approaches if we examine what is meant by **levels of meaning**. The first level is that of **abstract meaning**; we move from abstract meaning to **contextual meaning** (also called **utterance meaning**) by assigning sense and/or reference to a word, phrase or sentence. The third level of meaning is reached when we consider the speaker's intention, known as the force of an utterance. We shall begin by looking at each of these levels in turn.

1.3 From abstract meaning to contextual meaning

Abstract meaning⁵ is concerned with what a word, phrase, sentence, etc. could mean (for example, the dictionary meanings of words or phrases). The last four lines of the following excerpt⁶ ... state well the point I am trying to make:

Example 1

'What we want is the army to take over this country. See a bit of discipline then, we would ... The Forces, that's the thing. We knew what discipline was when I was in the Forces.' Pop always spoke of his time at Catterick Camp in the nineteen-forties as 'being in the Forces' as if he had been in the navy and air force and marines as well. 'Flog 'em, is what I say. Give 'em something to remember across their backsides.' He paused and swigged tea. 'What's wrong with the cat?' he said, so that anyone coming in at that moment, Alan thought, would have supposed him to be enquiring after the health of the family pet.

As Alan rightly observes, if you had not been party to the whole of the preceding discussion, you would probably have assumed that *cat* referred to a pet, rather than to the *cat-o'-nine-tails*. In most dictionaries *cat* is shown as having two abstract meanings: *a small four-legged animal with soft fur and sharp claws, often kept as a pet and a whip made from nine knotted cords, formerly used for flogging people.*⁷ But, quite clearly, the first meaning is by far the more common — the second meaning is restricted to a very limited **domain of discourse** — that of military life in earlier times.

More recently, *cat* has acquired an additional meaning — *catalytic converter* — which belongs to yet another domain of discourse, that of cars or air pollution. In the summer of 1990, one British television commercial for Volkswagen cars showed an elderly woman, cat-basket in hand, searching her new car for the cat, which, according to the advertisement, was supplied as standard. What this somewhat sexist advertisement rather tortuously illustrated is that if a hearer is in the 'wrong' domain of discourse, if, for example he or she thinks you are talking about pets when you are actually talking about cars or life on board ships in earlier times, the possibility of wrongly assigning sense is greater. Conversely, when you are in a known domain of discourse or when you know what social roles your interactant occupies, you will probably have little difficulty in assigning the correct sense to an ambiguous lexical item. So you will have no problem in knowing that a student who comes to ask you for a *handout* probably wants lecture notes, while the tramp who asks for a *handout* equally certainly does not.

The term *abstract meaning* does not apply only to single words. It can apply equally well to phrases or even to whole sentences. Supposing at a party you heard someone saying: *The*

Pearsons are on coke. Taken in the abstract (by consulting a dictionary of contemporary spoken English, for example) the word *coke* could (at least in theory) refer to *Coca-Cola*, *cocaine* or a *coal derivative*. And, accordingly, the whole expression *to be on coke* could have one of (at least) three abstract meanings: *to be drinking Coca-Cola*, *to use cocaine*, or *to have solid-fuel heating*. What the words actually meant on the occasion in question could only be determined in context.

In general, competent native speakers do not have to seek laboriously for the contextual meaning of a word, phrase or sentence in the way that the two previous examples may have implied. The contextual meaning is so obvious that it never even crosses our mind that there could be alternative interpretations. So, if a friend promises to send you a card from Rome, you do not agonize over whether it will be a picture postcard, a playing card or a business card. Unless your friends are particularly odd, the second two possibilities would never even enter your head. If we were not able to take such short cuts in interpretation, the process of understanding one another would be very inefficient. Nevertheless, there are occasions when we do quite genuinely experience difficulty in assigning contextual meaning and then we have to weigh up alternative interpretations. The likelihood of such problems occurring is increased still further when there are rapid changes of topic, as the following conversation illustrates:

Example 2

Speakers A and B had spent a long time discussing the relative merits of different computers, using terms such as 286, 386, RS/6000. A third person, C, had been in the room throughout this conversation, but had taken no part in it. Shortly afterwards B turned to C and said:

B: Do you know what fifteen fifteens are?

C: No, I don't know much about computer hardware.

In this case, a simple question about elementary arithmetic gets interpreted as a complicated question about sophisticated new computers, because speaker C thought he was in a different domain of discourse — thus *fifteen fifteens* is assigned the meaning of the name of a computer instead of the meaning *the number fifteen*.

The problems which confront people when they understand the abstract meaning (the range of linguistically possible meanings) without being able to determine the contextual

meaning is, of course, the very stuff of which fiction is made — comedies, tragedies, romances and, above all, mysteries and detective stories. In Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose*, for example, the monks Adso and William only discover the secret of the *finis Africae* after many false trails (and 250 pages!). Although they were able from the outset to translate the words of the text containing the clue to the mystery, they were unable to understand what the original writer, Venantius, meant by those words.

Example 3

'Secretum finis Africae manus supra idolum age primum et septimum de quatuor.'

'Is that clear?' he asked.

'The hand over the idol works on the first and the seventh of the four ...' I repeated, shaking my head. 'It isn't clear at all!'

'I know. First of all we have to know what Venantius meant by "idolum". An image, a ghost, a figure? And then what can this "four" be that has a "first" and a "seventh"? And what is to be done with them? Move them, push them, pull them?'

The monks in *The name of the rose* had to deal with two problems. The first was to assign **sense** to the word *idolum* (line 8) and the second to assign **reference** to the word *four* (line 9). We shall deal with these two problems separately.

1.3.1 Assigning sense in context

When people are engaged in conversations, they intuitively look for contextual sense (the sense in which the speaker/writer⁹ is using a word) as the following example¹⁰ illustrates:

Example 4

This exchange, which I overheard on a train, took place between two young Englishmen. Speaker A was reading a newspaper.

A: What's this lump they're always on about?

B: Read it out.

A: [Reads aloud from paper] Inland Revenue crack down on lump.

B: Oh, isn't it something to do with casual labour on building sites? The way they're paid — tax evasion and that?

Notice that speaker B did not list all the possible senses of *lump* (a shapeless mound; a hard swelling; a heavy, dull person; to put up with, etc.). To have done so would have been both irritating and unhelpful. Instead, he asked for sufficient context to enable him to tell his friend what, in his opinion, the writer of this particular article meant by the word *lump*.

As we have seen, part of the process of determining what speakers mean (as opposed to what their words mean) involves assigning sense to those words. In general, this process is very straightforward, but problems can occur and one of the most frequent causes of such problems occurs in the case of homonyms. (We have already seen several instances of homonyms (words which have the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings) causing misunderstandings — *cat*, *handout*, *coke* and *lump*.) The following example, taken from a Scottish local newspaper, *The Dunoon Observer*, caused offence as well as misunderstanding:

Example 5

Correction

The 'old pouffe' which started the fire at 7, Douglas Cottages, as reported last week, referred to an item of furniture and not to the owner, Mr Donnie McArthur.

We also saw that in example 3 the Latin word *idolum* caused particular problems. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, *idolum* is polysemous¹¹ in Latin, that is, it had several closely related meanings — *image*, *ghost* and *figure*. It is very often the case that lexical items have different ranges of polysemous meanings in different languages. Thus in English you can speak of a person's *head* or *foot* and you can also refer to the *head/foot* of a staircase (the different senses of the words are in a very obvious way related); you can do exactly the same with the French words *tête* and *piéd*. However, whereas in English the word *hand* can apply both to people and to clocks or watches, you cannot in French speak of **la main d'une montre* (although a French person would probably be able to work out what you meant). The problem was exacerbated for the monks, since they had no idea of the **context** in which the word was being used.

A potentially very serious example of the problems which can be caused by expressions having a different range of polysemous meanings in different languages was given to me by a colleague who was the chief interpreter (from Hebrew to

English) at the trial of John Demjanjuk.¹² This was an extremely sensitive, important and complex trial, one of the complications being that the trial was conducted in three languages — Hebrew, Ukrainian and English — and involved many interpreters. At one point in the trial a Hebrew-speaking lawyer presented an exhibit to the defendant and asked if he recognized this *tzilum* (צלילום). In Hebrew the word *tzilum* is polysemous and has three (closely related) meanings — *x-ray*, *photograph* and *photocopy* (xerox). In English, of course, these are three quite distinct lexical items. Unfortunately, the interpreter was positioned towards the back of the court and she was unable to see the exhibit. In the circumstances, she could only guess at the correct interpretation of the word and, as it happened, guessed wrongly, to the considerable confusion of all those who could not speak Hebrew.¹³

Assigning the correct or intended sense to polysemous or homonymous lexical items can be especially problematic for non-native speakers of a language, because they may lack the cultural background knowledge on which native speakers draw. For example, I was once listening to two German university students trying to work out the meaning of the word *roundabout* in a newspaper article on international economics. They looked up the word *roundabout* in a dictionary and one read out: *Traffic island*, *merry-go-round*, *indirect*. So they had three possible meanings (i.e. abstract meanings) of the word and in normal circumstances it would have been reasonable to assume that they would have experienced little difficulty in selecting the appropriate one for their particular context. However, the text they were working on was in fact making a rather obscure reference to a children's television programme *The magic roundabout* — an allusion which would have been picked up instantly by anyone who had grown up in Britain, but which would probably be completely lost on anyone else.

While homonyms are one of the most frequent causes of problems in assigning sense correctly, **homographs** — words which have the same spelling but different pronunciation and meaning — can cause similar problems. The first line of the next example¹⁴ was scrawled on a wall and the second line was added by way of comment by a different graffiti-writer. This is clearly an instance of wilful misinterpretation of the intended sense of *lead*:

Example 6

In People's China the workers take the lead!

[To which had been added]:

In capitalist England, the sods also take the iron, copper, floorboards and fillings from your teeth.

A third cause of incorrect assignment of sense can be **homophones** — words which have the same pronunciation, but different spelling and meaning. The following example, which appeared in the minutes of a management meeting at the BBC,¹⁵ was caused by the fact that the original newsreader spoke with a Northern Irish accent.

Example 7

The solicitor reported that the BBC was being sued in Ireland by a man who thought he had been described as having herpes. The BBC's defence was that it had accused him of having a hairpiece.

In each of the previous examples in this section, if the hearer failed to assign sense correctly, he or she would probably completely misunderstand what the speaker meant. In the following example, caused by the homophones *chaste* and *chased*, this is not entirely the case:

Example 8

'He's ever so funny, my dad. He gave her a lovely silver bracelet, one of those chased ones.'

Alan couldn't imagine how one bracelet could be more chaste than another, but he didn't ask.¹⁶

Even though Alan fails to assign sense correctly to the word *chased*, he nevertheless manages to understand the general import of what his girlfriend is telling him. We shall return to this example in section 1.5.3.

1.3.2 Assigning reference in context

So far we have discussed abstract meaning only in terms of assigning sense to words or phrases — i.e. working out what they mean in context. But, in everyday life, you need only to call to mind those tantalizing snippets of conversation overheard on

buses or in supermarkets to realize that it is perfectly possible to understand the sense of every word a speaker utters, yet still not understand what the speaker means. Years after having heard it, I still long to know what one woman was talking about when she said to her fellow bus passenger:

Example 9

And just think, if he hadn't fallen out of bed, I'd never have found out about it!

Why did I find it impossible to understand what this woman was talking about, when the sense of every word she uttered could have been understood by a three-year-old? The answer, of course, is that I did not know who *he* referred to, nor, more importantly, what was the *it* the speaker had found out about. In other words, I was unable to assign **reference** to her words.

In order to understand an utterance, we not only have to assign sense to words, but also to assign reference (i.e. to determine in context who or what is being referred to). Thus a notice which said: *Danger! Do not touch!* could be understood to some extent by all literate members of a community — they would know what the words meant and that the notice constituted a warning. But the notice could only fulfil its warning function properly if it was clear to the reader precisely what was being referred to — i.e. what must not be touched.

The practical joker who delights in stealing official signs and re-erecting them at appropriate (or inappropriate) new sites, exploits the fact that, whilst the notices may retain (more or less) the same sense when relocated, the reference can be changed to entertaining effect. Thus a sign saying *Reserved for the Vice-Chancellor* may vanish from the chair of honour in the Great Hall and reappear attached to a copy of *The Beano* in the Junior Common Room.¹⁷

Notice that the previous example simply said *Reserved for the Vice-Chancellor* and not *this (chair) is reserved*. Expressions such as *this* and *that* are called **deictic expressions**.¹⁸ Deictic expressions are those which derive part of their meaning from their context of utterance. **Place deictics**, such as *here, there, this, that*, do not mean very much in isolation; it is only when you know where the speaker is standing or what the speaker is indicating that they become truly meaningful. In the same way, **time deictics**, such as *yesterday, tomorrow, now*, only become fully meaningful if you know when the words were uttered. Other categories of deictic

expression operate in a similar way. These include **person deictics**, such as *I, he, you*; **discourse deictics**, such as *the former, the latter*; and social deictics,¹⁹ such as *Madam, Your Grace*, which tell us something about the social relationship between the speaker and (in this case) the addressee.

Virtually all deictic expressions, by their very nature, cause problems of reference assignment when removed from their original context of utterance, as the following excerpt from a detective novel²⁰ illustrates. A man has just found a compromising letter in his wife's handbag, asking her to meet the writer this Monday lunchtime:

Example 10

Suddenly the thought struck him: how long had the letter been in her bag? There was no date on the letter — no way at all of telling which particular Monday was meant. Had it been *last* Monday? There was no way he could be certain about things; and yet he had the strong conviction that the letter, presumably addressed to her at work, had been received only a day or so previously.

Even without any remove of time or place, it can be difficult to assign reference correctly to any utterance containing a third person pronoun (he, she, it, they) since these have an almost infinite number of possible referents. This is well illustrated in the following excerpt from Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*,²¹ which is at least three ways ambiguous.²² Rosencrantz is talking to one of the actors:

Example 11

- Act: The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter.
 Ros: (*Appalled*) Good God! We're out of our depth here.
 Act: No, no, no — *he* hasn't got a daughter — the old man thinks he's in love with *his* daughter.
 Ros: The old man is?
 Act: Hamlet, in love with the old man's daughter, the old man thinks.
 Ros: Ha! It's beginning to make sense! Unrequited passion!

Another example is to be found in Shakespeare's *Othello*,²³ when Othello, who has already begun to doubt his wife's fidelity,

overhears a conversation between Iago, his adjutant, and Cassio, the man he suspects of being his wife's lover:

Example 12

... she is persuaded I will marry her, out of her own love and flattery, not out of my promise ... she was here even now; she haunts me in every place. I was t'other day talking on the sea-bank ... she falls me thus about my neck.

Othello, already consumed by jealousy, is convinced that Cassio is talking about Othello's wife, Desdemona, when in fact the *she* in question is Bianca, a prostitute. There are many such examples to be found in literature.

A more entertaining (albeit unwitting) real-life example of the problem of assigning reference was provided by a television commentator, the late Wynford Vaughn-Thomas, at the launching of the Cunard liner, *The Queen Elizabeth*. 'And there she is', he announced to the television audience. 'The whole vast bulk of her.' Unfortunately, at that very moment the cameras switched from the new liner to the Queen Mother, who was about to perform the launching ceremony.

As we have already seen with the word *Monday* in example 10, even what appear to be straightforward cases of definite reference can be problematic when the reader or listener is in a different part of the world from the writer/speaker. For example, it is intensely irritating for people in the southern hemisphere when international journals are dated by season instead of by month: what is Spring 1991 in Europe is not Spring 1991 in New Zealand. Likewise titles such as *The Queen* or *The Prime Minister* obviously refer to quite different people in, say, The Netherlands, Sweden and Canada, as the following incident, which took place in March 1976, clearly illustrates. The British Labour M.P. Roy Hattersley, then second-in-command at the Foreign Office, had flown to Bulgaria on an official visit:²⁴

Example 13

'On the airport in the capital I was standing holding sheaves of flowers in both hands — they present a lot of flowers in Bulgaria. They'd played ... the band of the Bulgarian Army had played *God Save the Queen*, they were playing the Bulgarian National Anthem, which is a rather long national anthem and the British Ambassador standing next to me holding a rather smaller bunch of flowers whis-

pered from the corner of his mouth: "The Prime Minister has resigned." And I said to him, whispering behind my gladioli: "I didn't read that part of your briefing. Is the Prime Minister the *senior* figure here or is he just a figure-head, with the Party Secretary being the real boss?" To which Eddie Bolland — his name's engraved on my heart and mind — Eddie Bolland replied: "Not *their* Prime Minister, *our* Prime Minister!" To my eternal credit, I didn't drop a single gladioli, but it came as an enormous shock to me.'

You will have encountered similar problems when reading old books. For example, several books by Agatha Christie refer simply to *the war*; the reader is obliged to check when the book was written in order to establish which war the writer meant. And the further back in time you go, the harder it becomes to establish intended reference. Samuel Pepys,²⁵ for example, refers frequently to *The Duke of York* and *The Prince of Orange*. The identity of these people would have been perfectly clear to any contemporary of Pepys's, but modern readers may experience some difficulty in determining which of the many bearers of these titles were being referred to.

1.3.3 Structural ambiguity

In the two previous sections we have noted how we have to derive the sense and reference which a **speaker** intends from the range of possible senses and references which a **sentence** could have. A third cause of potential sentence-level ambiguity is structural. Consider the following example,²⁶ which relates to a report of a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham:

Example 14

Afterwards, the Bishop walked among the pilgrims eating their picnic lunches.

In this case the source of the ambiguity is syntactic. The hearer has to decide whether it was the Bishop or the pilgrims who ate the sandwiches.

1.3.4 Interaction of sense, reference and structure

In the three preceding sections I have given examples where

ambiguity is caused by single instances of ambiguities of sense, reference or structure. Very often, of course, these things will occur in combination.

In the corridor outside my room I once picked up a piece of card on which someone had printed OUT OF ORDER in large letters. Now, from my knowledge of the English language (that is, from my abstract linguistic knowledge), I know that the phrase *out of order* has a range of possible senses, including *not in the correct sequence* (e.g. of books on a library shelf), *not permissible* (e.g. of a question at a meeting) or *not working* (e.g. of a machine). My knowledge of the world (which here included knowledge of the sort of things people in my department usually put up notices about) told me that the last sense was by far the most likely and I surmised that the writer was warning someone that something was not (or had not been) working. Assigning reference — determining what was being referred to — was more difficult. I decided that the notice must refer to a machine in the corridor where I had found it, but there were several possible candidates, including a coffee machine, a laser printer and a photocopier. Moreover, since I had no idea when the message had been written and whether the notice had fallen off the machine or had been removed deliberately, I had no means of knowing whether or not the warning still applied.

I later found out that my initial guess had been wrong. A group of students had been trying to put several hundred M.A. dissertations back into chronological and alphabetical order. The notice I had found had fallen off a pile of manuscripts which had yet to be sorted. From this we can begin to see that the processes of assigning sense and reference are frequently mutually dependent: unless you know what something refers to, you may not be able to work out the sense, and conversely, if you do not know the sense of a word or phrase, it is more difficult to work out what is being referred to. The following examples show how structural ambiguity can lead to ambiguity of sense:

Example 15

*Speaker B was a well-known cricket commentator, Brian Johnston, Speaker A was his wife.*²⁷

A: Have you seen the dog bowl?

B: No, but I've seen it play several good innings.

Brian Johnston is exploiting the potential structural ambiguity between *dog bowl* as a complex noun or a verb phrase.

Example 16

The late Brian Redhead, a well-known radio presenter, was discussing with Sir Geoffrey Howe (Foreign Secretary at the time), the reluctance of Britain's EEC partners to support the U.K.'s proposal to impose sanctions on Syria:

Was it because the EEC men were not all there?

Not all there is structurally ambiguous, as it could be analysed as either an adverbial or an adjectival complement. Analysing it as an adverbial would give you the meaning *absent (from the talks)*, while analysing it as an adjectival complement would give you the meaning *out of their minds* or *insane*.

1.3.5 Ambiguity and intentionality

Instances of surface-level ambiguities of sense, reference and structure are legion. Indeed, as Corder (1981: 39) has pointed out:

Well-formed sentences produced by native speakers are mostly ambiguous when taken out of context.

Comparatively few ambiguous sentences are genuinely misleading when taken **in context**, although such instances do occur. The following example, which I read on a sign adjacent to Lancaster station, might not normally have caused any confusion, but it did in the historical context of the day on which I saw it (it was the day of the Duke of York's²⁸ wedding):

Example 17

Flags 2' x 2'.
£11.50 per dozen
Delivery free.

I would probably never have realized that the word *flags* here referred to *flagstones* (paving stones) if I had not been puzzling over why anyone would need to have their flags delivered, even in fairly large numbers.

So ubiquitous are ambiguous sentences that speakers rarely notice that their utterances are ambiguous and cannot recognize the ambiguity even when it is pointed out. A particularly striking instance of this was provided by Mr Cyril Smith, at the time the

Liberal M.P. for Rochdale and a man readily recognized throughout the country because he was extraordinarily fat. During a radio programme²⁹ Smith was expressing the opinion that racist attitudes could not be altered by consciously changing the language people use, but he claimed to speak as someone who:

Example 18

'... does a very very great deal of work amongst the immigrant population — I had sixteen of 'em for lunch at the House of Commons last Tuesday...'

The audience laughed so much that Mr Smith was unable to continue speaking for some moments, but he clearly failed to recognize the ambiguity of what he had said, and became extremely angry because the audience appeared to be doubting the sincerity of his regard for ethnic minority groups.

I have said that, in general, only one utterance meaning is intended by the speaker, but there are exceptions, the most obvious being in literary discourse (particularly poetry³⁰) or in jokes.³¹ But we can find examples outside these genres where it is not possible to understand the speaker's intention without understanding both meanings. Examples 19 and 20 are excerpts from a speech given by Glenda Jackson, M.P.³²

Example 19

In this extract, Ms Jackson was making reference to the desire expressed by John Major on becoming Prime Minister to make Britain 'a classless society'.

'They call it a "classless society". And it is classless. There are no classes for the children turned away for the lack of a qualified teacher. There are no classes for 200,000 children denied nursery places. And there is certainly no class in a government that for the last decade has sold our children and our future short.'

Example 20

In the second extract she was discussing her education at a State School and later at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art:

'And forty years later I stand here addressing conference. Yet without state education it's doubtful I'd be addressing envelopes.'

My final example of deliberate ambiguity is taken from *The Money Programme*.³³ Once again the hearer cannot fully understand the speaker's intention without **simultaneously** entertaining the two meanings of the word *bank*.

Example 21

The speaker is referring to the Swiss city of Geneva:

'It's a city where "The banks along the river" has a different meaning from usual.'

1.4 Utterance meaning: the first level of speaker meaning

When in interaction we have resolved all the ambiguities of sense, reference and structure — when we have moved from abstract meaning (what a particular sentence could mean in theory) to what the speaker actually does mean by these words on this particular occasion — we have arrived at **contextual meaning** or **utterance meaning**.³⁴ Utterance meaning can be defined as 'a sentence-context pairing' (Gazdar 1979) and is the first component of **speaker meaning**.

1.4.1 Importance of utterance meaning

Now, you may feel, and with some justification, that (except, of course, for story book detectives deciphering baffling clues!) in everyday interaction people do not normally go around straining their interpretative faculties trying to determine sense and reference. Although it is certainly the case that the majority of sentences, taken out of context, are, at least from the point of view of the hearer,³⁵ potentially multiply ambiguous, in real life we rarely have difficulty in interpreting them correctly in context. In fact, more often than not, we fail to notice ambiguities of sense and reference at all, unless some misunderstanding occurs or unless, as in jokes or word-play, our attention is deliberately drawn to their existence.

But, as we have already seen with the example of the Demjanjuk trial, problems really do occur in assigning sense and reference and there are cases where correctly assigning sense and reference can, quite literally, be a matter of life and death. An example of this can be found in the transcript of a controversial English murder trial, which was held in 1952. A youth of

nineteen, Derek Bentley, was charged jointly with a sixteen-year-old, Christopher Craig, with having committed the then capital offence of murdering a police officer. It was never disputed that it was Craig who fired the fatal shot; Bentley was unarmed and had, in fact, already been caught and was being restrained by a policeman at the time the shot was fired. The case against Bentley hinged on the allegation that he had shouted, *Let him have it, Chris!* At Bentley's trial, the prosecution argued that this meant *Shoot the policeman*, which in turn was construed as 'deliberate incitement to murder'. An alternative interpretation proposed later in Bentley's defence³⁶ was that it referred to *the gun*, *him* referred to *the police officer* and that far from telling Craig to shoot his pursuer, Bentley was recommending Craig to hand over the gun. This second interpretation was rejected by the court and Bentley was found guilty and hanged. Craig, who had actually fired the shot, was still a minor and was sentenced only to youth custody.³⁷

It is generally true that law courts (at least in Britain) exhibit an extreme reluctance to take account of anything other than the dictionary meaning of particular expressions. A particular source of irritation to me is the use of so-called 'expert witnesses' in legal cases involving the use of obscene or abusive (often racist) language. In such cases the defence invariably bring in to court some cobwebby philologist who will testify, for example, that to shout *Bollocks!* is not offensive because it 'means' *little balls*.³⁸ It seems that the only linguistic evidence admissible in these cases is the etymology of a word or phrase (and frequently the 'etymology' is wholly spurious) — no account is taken of the circumstances in which the word is used nor of the speaker's intention in uttering it. In another court case,³⁹ the defendant was charged with four offences against the owner of a Chinese restaurant. One was that he had called the restaurant owner a *Chinky bastard*, but this charge was dismissed because an 'expert' testified that the expression 'meant' *'wandering parentless child travelling through the countryside in the Ching Dynasty'* and was in no way offensive.⁴⁰ Courts seem incapable of taking on board the fact that the original lexical meaning of an expression is not a good guide to the speaker's intention in employing that expression.