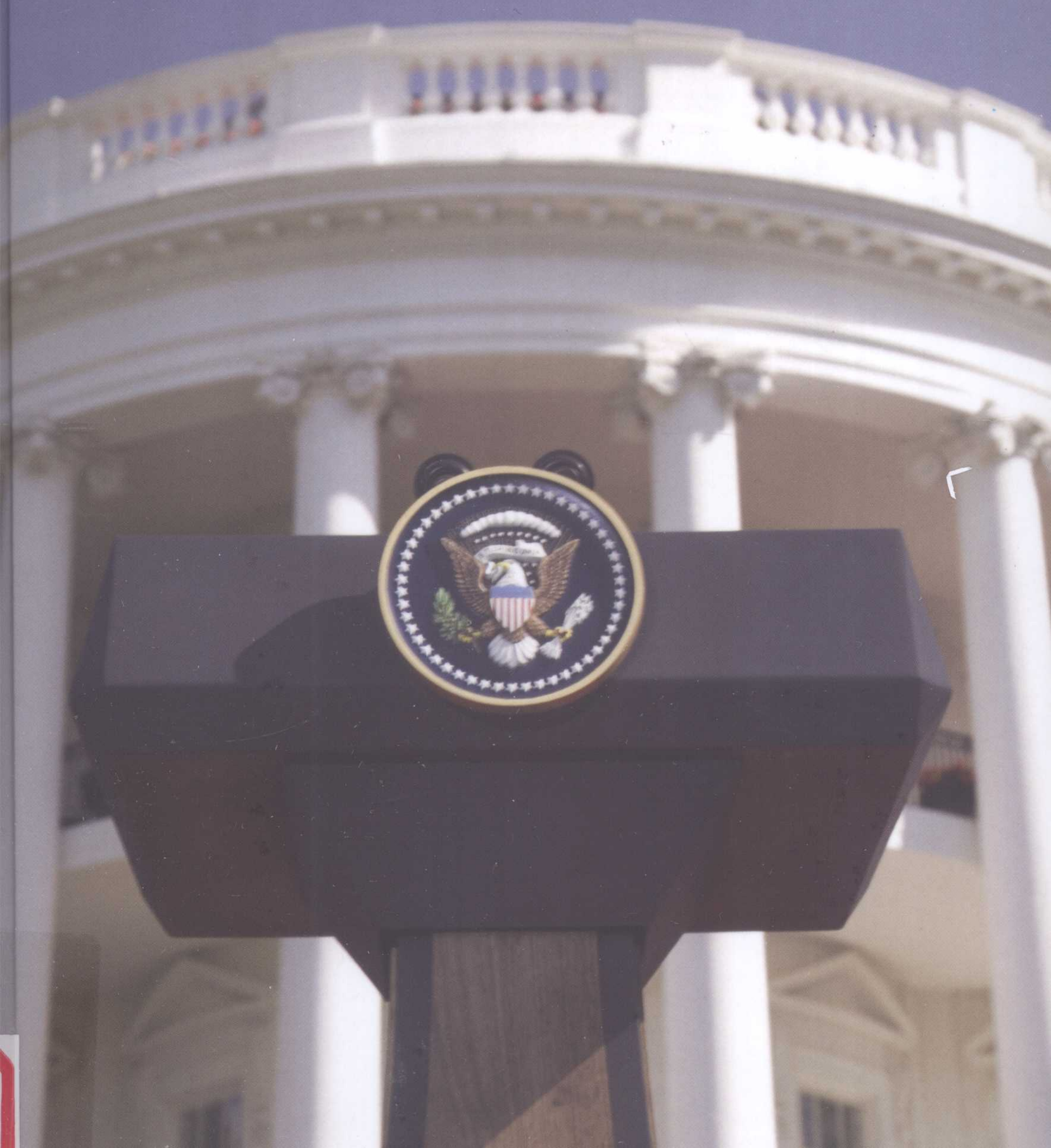
JOHN WILSON

Talking with the President

The Pragmatics of Presidential Language



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For Linda, my soul mate

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PRAGMATICS AND THE PRESIDENT

Introduction

Consider the following brief exchange:

a. Should we trust John?
b. John is a Republican but he is honest.

The answer carries an implication that "Republicans are dishonest" and a statement that "John is a Republican"; hence John would be dishonest (see Lakoff, 1971: 67). This is denied, however, through the clause introduced by "but." Most readers will understand all of this intuitively, but where in (b) does it say "John is dishonest?" It doesn't, yet an expectation about Republicans in general, and therefore John in particular, has been set up; otherwise, what is it that the "but" clause denies? How does "but" do that? There is nothing in the conceptual nature of "but" that says it must mean a "denial of expectations." Indeed, it can be used in other ways. For example, one can use "but" for contrast, "John is fat but Fred is thin," or one can use it for correction, "John is not married but he has a partner." Given that "but" may be used in several different ways, it is sometimes called "procedural" (Blakemore, 2002). This simply means that we must look at how it is used in context, taking account of interactional expectations along with local and shared knowledge, and when we do this we are doing pragmatics. In (b) it only makes sense to say "but John is honest" if there is an implication from the first clause that Republicans are not normally honest. Pragmatics helps us understand how all this works, that is, it helps us understand the way(s) in which meanings are worked out in context; and this is not just a theoretical issue.

On April 17, 2013, President Barack Obama delivered a speech from the White House Rose Garden. This followed the Senate's rejection of an extension of gun control checks brought forward following a growing number of fatal shootings in various parts of the United States, and in particular the Newtown School massacre

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in Connecticut, when 20 children and several adults were killed. Reacting to the Newtown tragedy, Obama said he had a personal responsibility to help stop such events from occurring again; hence he brought forward plans for changes in gun control. Many considered the proposed changes relatively minor, so the Senate's rejection of even these minor changes made Obama visibly angry during his speech.

This is also displayed in the way he makes use of "but" to set up contexts where there is a "denial of expectations:"

> By now it is well known that 90 percent of the American people support universal background checks that make it harder for a dangerous person to buy a gun. . . . Ninety percent of Americans support the idea. Most Americans think it's the law. And a few minutes ago 90 percent of Democrats just voted for the idea. BUT it's not going to happen, because 90 percent of the Republicans in the Senate just voted against it.

We can see how Obama constructs a numerical context in which the overwhelming evidence suggests that universal background checks should proceed, but they won't, and the reason for this "denial of expectation" is given in the final statement, when we find it is the Republicans who are responsible. Variations of this use of "but" occur throughout the speech:

> That's why 90% of the American people supported it. BUT instead of supporting this program the gun lobby and its allies willfully lied about the Bill. They claimed that it would create some kind of "big brother" gun registry even though the bill did the opposite . . . plain and simple there in the text. BUT that didn't matter.
>
> A lot of Republicans had that fear BUT Democrats had that fear too.

In these brief examples we see how "but" is not only encoded pragmatically, it is also used for the specific political goal of isolating the denial of expectations (that the universal gun control bill should be passed) to one source, the Republicans, and in particular a subset ofRepublican senators.

This is just one brief example of one pragmatic marker in action, but it exemplifies the important fact that meanings are not always reflected in a simple "one word one meaning" equation. It is frequently the case that social and structural contexts interact with language to create specific interpretations and understandings, and these in turn are produced for specific communicative purposes.

Pragmatics is now central to any theory that attempts to explain human language (Huang, 2007), in particular the ways in which we understand and interpret the relationship between "what we say" and "what we mean." It is also central to our understanding of all aspects of everyday communication since our understanding of what is said in context draws on a wide range of knowledge types beyond the purely linguistic. Given the centrality of language in politics in general, and presidential politics in particular, it should not be surprising that pragmatics could provide insights into particular forms and use of presidential language—indeed, it is hard to see how one could explain presidential language without some recourse to how meaning is constructed in context, that is, without a consideration of pragmatics.

In general I will use the term "pragmatics" to refer to the analysis and description of meaning construction in social contexts of interaction, which is sometimes called "sociopragmatics" (Archer, 2005; Culpeper, 2009). Seen in this way, pragmatics is interactional and functional; it is the outcome of intentions and communicative goals. Such a perspective employs pragmatic tools from the intersection of a broad range of disciplinary positions, which would include inter alia sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, and the philosophy of language.

When one looks at work on presidential language, there is a significant and growing body of knowledge that includes a wide range of scholarship from a broad range of disciplines (see Medhurst, 2008). There are certainly texts on political discourse, and there is a virtual industry devoted to rhetorical studies of presidential communication—although the term "rhetoric" is used in several different (if related) ways, from the classical "persuasion and argumentation" perspective, through thematic or content-based analyses, to work that simply sees "rhetoric," "language," and "discourse" as synonymous (see Schroedel et al., 2013; Charteris-Black, 2014). There is, however, a more limited range of literature on the linguistic nature of presidential language, with almost no book-length studies focused specifically on this topic. There have recently been several texts linking cognitive linguistics, specifically through metaphor, to political understanding and interpretation in general (see, for example, Lakoff, 1987; Charteris-Black, 2014; Wodak, 2011), and there are also many texts that highlight, through chapters or themes, various linguistic aspects of political language; and, of course, one can find significant numbers of journal articles on politics, some of which focus on a specific president. However, there are few linguistically focused texts on presidential language, with fewer still concentrating only on the field of pragmatics, and almost none that offers a pragmatic analysis of several different presidents. Further, there is a core difference between the pragmatic approach and much of the other research noted above, in that pragmatics is at heart "inferential": meanings are worked out from evidence provided by an utterance in context. This goes beyond a general view that meanings can simply be read off the language as "signals" for comprehension or decoding (Sperber and Wilson, 1995); rather, sentences or utterances are the tools that speakers use in context to generate speaker intentions and speaker meanings.

Pragmatics and Presidential Language

During the initial development of modern pragmatics in the 1930s, scholars such as Morris, Carnap, and Peirce made a distinction between syntax (the relation of signs to one another), semantics (the relations of signs to what they denote), and pragmatics (the relation of signs to their users and interpreters). However, due to the influence of formal and abstract models of language research, which ignored language use and language users, there was not much progress on pragmatics until the 1960s and 1970s (see below). It is generally accepted now that pragmatics is required to explain a variety of problems within language theory, and that it is a significant component in understanding all forms of linguistic communication, and indeed miscommunication.

Centrally, pragmatics is concerned with the speaker, who she is and to whom she is speaking, what are her intentions and beliefs, and how what she says is affected by social circumstances, institutional structures, and social or cultural constraints. Within everyday interaction, pragmatics explains what people do with language and for what purpose, for example, being sarcastic or ironic, telling lies, making promises, telling jokes, or telling stories. Seen in this way, pragmatics underpins not only informal interaction but also institutional and formal behaviors, as in teaching, medicine, law, and, of course, politics.

Drawing upon pragmatic analysis, this book highlights the ways in which language is used in various contexts of presidential communication. The objective is not to claim that there is a specific pattern of linguistic use found within and across all presidential interaction; the aim is to reflect on how pragmatics assists us in understanding certain forms of communicative action adopted by several different presidents in dealing with a range of political problems and issues. In this way, while each chapter can be read independently, the development and application of a range of tools and theories serve to cumulatively advance the role of pragmatics in helping us understand and explain particular uses of presidential language. The term "presidential language" obviously suggests language as used by the "president," but in addition—and also presidential, I would argue—there are some examples of language used when a president may have been a presidential candidate (Kennedy and Obama), or examples of the language of a president when he has retired or resigned (Nixon).

As we will see, there are a range of pragmatic theories and pragmatic tools available for research. We will not be wedded to any specific theory and will adopt an ecological approach, drawing upon those tools that help explain the phenomenon at hand. It is not the job of this book to resolve disputes between particular theories, or to champion one specific type of analysis, or to satisfy all pragmatic tastes at the same time; the goal is to provide insights into particular examples of presidential language from a pragmatic perspective.

Of course, this will require some form of selection of both presidents and data. In the case of data, the aim was to select well-known, for positive or negative reasons, cases of presidential language, whether spoken or written or both. In the case of those presidents chosen, six have been selected: John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, Ronald W. Reagan, William F. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack H. Obama. These examples cover most of the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, and each displays some specifically relevant communicative or other pragmatically interesting dimension. John F. Kennedy was famed for his quality of oratory, Nixon for his manipulative use of language, Reagan for his gift of telling stories, Clinton for his ability to engage the public and to linguistically turn arguments and descriptions in particular directions. Bush, on the other hand, was famed for his inability to use language appropriately, and Obama returns us to the rhetorical flourishes of early Kennedy. It is accepted that other presidents will also have reflected some similar communicative qualities (most presidents would have told stories, for example, and many were "economical with the truth," or lied); those presidents chosen, however, were particularly associated with the overall use of a particular pragmatic topic, for example, Reagan for storytelling or Nixon for lying.

These presidents are, therefore, an interesting group for the application of pragmatic analysis. It would not be possible, of course, to explore every pragmatic dimension of every speech, phrase, or word used by these presidents. Hence, for each president one or two interesting pragmatic phenomena are highlighted for analysis and are presented as evidence of the kinds of insights that pragmatics can provide in the study of presidential language.

Pragmatics: An Example

Consider the following question and answer:

(1) Q. Has anyone seen John lately?
A. I saw John with a woman last night.

What can we say about this answer? We have no idea who said it, when, where, or why. But we do know that it is a sentence of English. We also know that the pronoun "I" refers to a different person from John, and that it also refers to the speaker of the sentence. We know there is someone called John, and that he is the same John who appears in the question and the answer, and given the nature of names and naming, we will assume that John is male. We also know that the sentence is highlighting information from the past, "last night," and that there is also another person referred to, that is, "a woman." We know, of course, that the term "woman" is gender specific for a female, but also a female of a certain age, that is, not normally a girl or teenager. Given this, we can also infer that John is probably not a "boy" but a man, although this is not guaranteed. We have gleaned most of this information from the rules of syntax and semantics. But there is other information here that is not so easily classified. For example, we can infer that the woman John was with was not his wife, his mother, his sister, or his aunt. But where does this information come from? It is certainly not encoded in any of the words of the sentence. One of the major theorists of modern pragmatics, Paul H. Grice, sheds light on this question. Grice (1967) suggests that when we communicate with others our primary aim is to "be cooperative"; Grice referred to this as the "Cooperative Principle":

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (1989, 26)

The principle is often interpreted in terms of a common-sense view of cooperation, suggesting a form of agreement and harmony in conversation or communication, but this is rarely the case. We lie, mislead, argue, speak metaphorically, and so on. Grice's primary aim was to distinguish between what we say and what we mean, and although the two may not always match, Grice believed that communicators tried to behave in a rational manner in an effort to produce successful communication. In considering how we could reconcile this "rational" process with the vagaries and indirectness of everyday talk, the Cooperative Principle provides the framework within which we "work out" meanings, as opposed to providing any guarantee that what we say is always the same as what we mean. In line with this, Grice provides a series of maxims underlying the Cooperative Principle:

> **Maxim of Quantity**
> Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
> Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.
> **Maxim of Quality**
> Do not say what you believe to be false.
> Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
> **Maxim of Relation**
> Be relevant.
> **Maxim of Manner**
> Avoid obscurity of expression.
> Avoid ambiguity.
> Be brief.
> Be orderly.

As noted above, the Cooperative Principle and its maxims are invoked by Grice to explain one of the core issues of pragmatics, the difference between "what is said" and "what is meant." He notes that in some cases speakers seem to mean more than they say. Consider (2) and (3):

(2) Some the girls came to the party.
(3) Q: Where is John? A: The pubs are open.

In (2) we can infer that if some of the girls came to the party, then not all of the girls came to the party. This is because words like "all, some, many, most . . ." are said to form a scale where the use of one form will either confirm or negate the others. So if we say "all" of the girls came to the party, this entails (makes true in all circumstances) that "some of the girls came to the party." On the other hand, if we say "some of the girls came to the party," we infer that the speaker means "not all" of the girls came to the party. This inference is generated by what Grice calls a "conventional implicature," because it is based on the meanings of the words themselves. In (3), however, the answer implies (but does not state) that John is in the pub. This Grice calls a "conversational implicature" because it is worked out in the context of this specific conversational encounter. Assuming that the respondent is being cooperative, relevant, and informative, we can infer that he or she has reason to believe that "John is in the pub" (because that is where John goes when the pub is open). Though this is not known for certain, it is the best information available for answering the question.

Returning to example (1), because of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims we expect the speaker to say as much as required while being both relevant and informative. Since the speaker does not define the woman as John's wife or mother, we infer that the "woman" is not John's wife or mother. This type of meaning is pragmatic, because it is inferred from the language used in context.

We should also note that there is a sequential relationship between the question and answer. Questions and answers occur together, with the question delimiting the area of information being sought, and the answer usually providing such information. Conversation Analysis (a part of pragmatics according to Levinson, 2003) suggests that the words following a question are assessable as an answer, because the question provides a structural and interpretive constraint on the turn that follows. In this sense, "I saw John with a woman last night" may be seen as a response, and a specific type of response called an "answer." Answers form what conversation analysts call the second part of a paired structure, in which the first part is the question. Hence, questions/answers are referred to "adjacency pairs" (ten Have, 2007). We can say, then, that there is an interactional aspect to the response in (1) because its meaning is related, in part, to the question that has generated it as a response.

In assessing meaning we have sequential information as well as the information provided by Gricean implicatures, and we also have what we might think of as the "semantic" meaning of the sentence itself. Understanding all of this information requires consideration of human cognition and reasoning as well as social and cultural practices and behaviors. This is a complex task, and many linguists and philosophers try to keep semantics and pragmatics distinct so that one can consider the conventional meaning of language independent of context. Social psychologists, sociolinguists, sociologists, and others eschew such a distinction, and argue that all meaning arises in context and that a "null context" does not exist. Sociopragmatics acknowledges this issue and accepts that social context is central to understanding everyday meaning.

Consider the following political example from Governor Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential campaign. He was interviewed on CNN and was asked about a secretly taped comment he made at a fundraising event: (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/09/mitt-romney-cnn-interview_n_1952708.html):

> There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the President no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that the government has a responsibility to care for them. . . .

These claims caused outrage when the tape was released. At first Romney attempted to clarify his position to the media and public, but then opted to accept that what he said was wrong, and apologized.

> INTERVIEWER: You weren't exactly eloquently stating your position, later and more recently you said you were completely wrong. I'm curious Governor how did that evolution in your thinking go on from the initial reaction once that tape came out to what you said the other day that you were completely wrong.
>
> ROMNEY: Well, what I'm saying is that what the words that came out were not what I meant and what I mean I think ah people will understand that if I'm President I'll be President of 100% of the people.

Romney claims that what he said was not necessarily what he meant, and that because of this misunderstanding he has been interpreted in a very negative way. As he put it elsewhere:

> And, you know, now and then, things don't come out exactly the way you want them to come out. They don't sound the way you thought they sounded. . . . And now, with a good opposition campaign, they grab it, they blow it up, maybe they take it a bit out of context, maybe they don't, but, it obviously, is paraded in a way that you hadn't intended. (http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/06/romney-regrets-47-comments/)

We have all, of course, been in a similar position when we say, "that's not what I mean" or "that's not what I meant." Sometimes this may be a semantic issue—you have chosen the wrong words for the meaning you wanted to convey—or it may be a pragmatic issue—you have chosen the words you wanted to say, but you didn't realize the meaning they would convey in context.

Romney's original statement seemed pretty clear, but his answer in this interview may be less so. His argues that what he said was not what he meant, but in general terms his meaning seems clearly stated:

a. There are 47% a who will vote for the President—no matter what;
b. There are 47% who are with him;
c. (47%) Who are dependent on government;
d. (47%) Who believe they are victims;
e. (47%) Who believe that the government has a responsibility to care for them.

These statements can be assessed as true or false; they do not imply their meanings, they state them. But there is also a negative association here, specifically that Romney cannot change these peoples' minds, and that they will always want the state to look after them, and hence they are not relevant to his campaign or to his conservative aspirations.

In Romney's response to the interviewer's question, he tries to tell us what he meant, and then makes a claim that people understand that if he is president he will be president of 100% of the people. The relevance here is that since Romney will be responsible for all the people, this would have to include the 47% of the people he had previously criticized. Of course, this does not deny the set of statements in his taped claims about the 47%. He could still be president of 100% of the people, of whom 47% were exactly as he said. But here, however, Romney deals with the negative associations of his statement, as mentioned above. As president he will not abandon or ignore people simply because they disagree with him; as president he is responsible for everyone (100%).

The context of the interview is by its very nature "intertextual" (see Fairclough, 1984)—it contains explicit and implicit elements from other texts, such as what Romney said on tape as well as what was said by newspapers, other politicians, and the public. While the questions in this interview share elements with the question in example (1), specifically they both expect answers, there are also contextual differences: the questions to Romney arise as part of a televised interview, which means that answers can and will be followed up by other questions; interview questions have a number of levels or parts; and in the case of Romney, they contain social and structural presuppositions about his responsibility for what he said and whether he has really changed his mind; and questions to Romney act as much as challenges as requests for information.

It is clear from this example why some pragmatic analysts tend to disregard social context when discerning meaning; they argue that context conveys information that is too varied and unwieldy (see Huang, 2007). Other analysts counter that a study of meaning in context must include social, cultural, or cognitive issues. This is a core debate within pragmatics about how the study of meaning in context should proceed. In our consideration of presidential language, we will adopt a broad view of pragmatics, one that will initially define pragmatics in line with Lycan (1995), as expressed in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*:

> Pragmatics studies the use of language in context, and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation.

How broad do we want to make "context"? If we want to make sense of natural language in communicative contexts, we must acknowledge that everyday interaction is full of all kinds of contextual information relevant to a pragmatic assessment. To understand this position, let me tell you a story.

A Short Story about Pragmatics: Part One

In the early part of the twentieth century, those studying linguistic meaning, particularly those within the philosophy of language, were influenced by the success of mathematics in bringing order to a significantly complex physical world. Deciphering linguistic meaning could be difficult because language is often confusing—it can be ambiguous, where one word or sentence has multiple meanings, or where more than one word or sentence mean the same thing (synonymy). Language can also contain irony and metaphor, where sentences can mean the opposite of what is said, or it can be used to talk about things that don't exist, as in fairy tales or mythology. In the seventeenth century the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz argued that the confusions and inconsistencies of human language might reflect a confused mind (see Mates, 1986). What was needed, he argued, was a logically constructed language that would produce concise and ordered thought. He called for a more precise logical and mathematical meta-language to explain ordinary language; this meta-language would be a language that was different from the object language requiring explanation.

Gottlieb Frege (see Ricketts and Potter, 2010) and Bertrand Russell (1956) attempted to produce one of the first formal accounts of language meaning. They focused in particular on the meaning of reference in language—the referential relationship between words and sentences and objects and concepts. For instance, how does "London" refer to the capital of England? Or how does the definite description "the first man on the moon" designate a specific individual? Reference was seen as providing a description of specific objects, or in the case of proper names, abbreviated or associated descriptions. Problems arose almost immediately, many of which are still being worked out today (see Devitt, 2004; Campbell, 2002; Muller, 2013). Frege noted that there were sentences that had different meanings but referred to the same object. His famous example is that of "the evening star" and "the morning star." Although both terms refer to the planet Venus, they do so in different ways, which Frege referred to as "modes of presentation." To explain this, he introduced a distinction between the "sense" of a sentence (roughly the description) and its referent or reference (the object). There were many other problematic issues with reference, such as the use of sentences which refer to objects that do not exist, as in "Hercules was a great hero," or "the present king of France is bald." Commenting on such sentences, Russell noted, "logic . . . must not admit a unicorn any more than zoology can" (Russell, 1920: 169). Like Leibniz, Russell wanted to reconstruct natural human language as a "logically" formal system by avoiding any "obstinate addiction to ordinary language." This is an important claim, and one that still resonates throughout modern pragmatics, as we will see later. For the present, we will note that Russell's solution to nonexistent names, such as "Hercules" or "Pegasus," was that they were not logically proper names, which means, simply, that they can be understood in terms of their "disguised" descriptions:

Hercules was a hero of Greek mythology, said to be the son of Zeus.
Pegasus was the immortal winged horse of Bellerophon.

There are many other puzzles here, but it is fair to say that the Frege-Russell approach to reference was preferred until the late 1950s or early 1960s, when alternative approaches began to accept that in many cases it is not just language that refers, but also speakers who refer using language. To understand this, we need to note that for Russell (and philosophy in general at the time) sentences (or propositions) were assessed as either true or false. The statement "London is the capital of England" is true within our present system of knowledge, and the statement "Glasgow is the capital of England" is false. It also follows in a more systemic sense (logically) that if "London is the capital of England" is true, then a sentence such as "London is not the capital of England" is false. And, of course, if the sentence "London is the capital of England" is false, then the sentence "London is not the capital of England" would be true. In general terms this makes sense, but the philosopher P. F. Strawson challenged this Russellian view of sentences by arguing that in certain cases of negation one could not decide whether a sentence was true or false. Strawson gave examples of sentences that carry what are called "presuppositions," that is, types of information taken for granted. Consider the following two sentences:

John managed to stop in time.
John didn't manage to stop in time.

Both sentences contain the word "manage," which is a "factive verb," or a verb that presupposes the truth of its complement. So in these two sentences, what is presupposed is that John "tried to stop in time," succeeding in one case and failing in the other. But in both sentences, regardless of the outcome, it remains true that John did try to stop in time. Hence, argues Strawson, one cannot simply say that one sentence is true and the other false. This situation is further complicated by the fact that "presuppositions" can be canceled, as in the following:

John managed to stop in time even though he didn't try.
John didn't manage to stop in time and he didn't try.

There are many other issues surrounding "presuppositions," but they need not concern us now. We should just note that they created a problem for semantics where it had been assumed that a true sentence and its negation should produce a false sentence, and a false sentence and its negation should produce a true sentence. For those who preferred an organized and formal view of meaning, any talk of sentences that might be neither true nor false was heresy. However, Strawson drew attention to the idea that human language might be structured as it is for human communication, and this was an early indication of the emergence