but, even here, one form is likely to have different connotations from the other (*lockjaw* is a lower register, i.e. more informal, term than *tetanus* in this example), and it is a sign of efficiency within language systems that where two lexemes fulfil exactly the same role one will tend to oust the other. Perhaps for this reason *lockjaw* is an old-fashioned term these days, the medical term *tetanus* having largely prevailed in everyday usage.

Partial synonymy, on the other hand – as demonstrated by *conceal* and *hide* above, which overlap in many of their senses – is quite common: in some cases, different lexemes of similar or identical meaning are associated with different **registers**. While *child* might be preferred to *kid* except in informal situations, the more elevated term *minor* (or *youth*) might be appropriate in a formal or legal context.

> *The only words for semantic relatedness in general use in our language are synonym (word of the same meaning) and antonym (word of opposite meaning). But even the very simple illustration I have given shows up the inadequacies of this terminology, particularly in regard to contrasts of meaning. The proportions above show that there is no one answer to the question: 'What is the antonym of woman?': girl and man are equally suitable candidates. The trouble is that the word 'antonym' encourages us to think that words contrast only on a single dimension; whereas in fact they may contrast with other words on a number of dimensions at once.*
>
> (Leech 1974: 99)

ANTONYMS

Antonymy involves opposition of meaning, which can take a variety of forms. In the case of **gradable antonyms**, for example *long* and *short*, to affirm one member of the pair is to negate the other:

- X is short entails X is not long
- X is long entails X is not short

An important property of gradable antonyms is that negation of one does not entail the other, i.e. 'not tall' does not entail 'short': it is perfectly possible to be neither. They can be used in sentence frames of the 'X is Y-er than Z' type, and are distinguished from **non-gradable antonyms** or **complementaries** (e.g. *alive/dead; true/false*) in that, for the latter, negation of one **does** entail the other:

- X is not true entails X is false
- X is not dead entails X is alive

Another kind of antonymy involves what are known as **relational opposites**. If I *give* you something, then you *receive* it; if John is Paul's *teacher* then Paul is John's *pupil*, and so on. Finally, there is the antonymy of **reversives**, in which one form means not the negative of the other, but its reverse: examples here include *enter/exit* (or *entrance/exit*), *remember/forget*, *tie/untie* and so on.

Spotlight: Gradable antonyms

In the case of gradable antonyms, one member of the pair is generally perceived as the unmarked or default option in expressions of degree, e.g. '20 miles long' not '20 miles short'. In 2010 the American comedian Joan Rivers was unimpressed by her host's use of a stylistically marked choice to reveal her age, and responded with one of her own:

> 'I met Vanessa Feltz and she said: "Here's Joan, she's 77 years young," and I wanted to say "And here's Vanessa Feltz and she's 350 pounds thin."'

HOMONYMS

The term **homonym** will be familiar in its common meaning – 'word pronounced or spelled in the same way as another' – but the term is used with greater precision by linguists, for whom only words with identical pronunciation, also known as **homophones**, count as homonyms. Homonyms may or may not be spelled identically: *see* as a verb meaning to apprehend by vision and *see* meaning the diocese of a bishop are both **homonyms** and **homographs**, while *gate* and *gait* are homonyms but not homographs.

A related concept here is **heteronym**, which refers to homographs which are pronounced differently, e.g. 'bow' in *to bow politely* and in *he adjusted his bow tie*. Homonymy needs to be distinguished from **polysemy**, which refers to a single word having multiple meanings, for example *set* meaning a group of things with something in common, to prepare as in *to set a trap* or a *set* as in a part of a tennis match.

In practice, separating homonymy and polysemy can be a challenge and the boundaries are not always clear. Should we, for example, regard the two uses of *foot* in *he hurt his foot playing football* and *she found it at the foot of the bed* as separate lexemes $foot_1$ and $foot_2$, i.e. homomyms, or as a single, polysemous word *foot*? It's fairly clear that in this case, the criterion most lexicographers would invoke is relatedness of meaning: while $foot_2$ does not denote a part of the body, it shares with $foot_1$ the notion of being at the end of something, and it is indeed where one's feet go when sleeping. For this reason, most dictionaries would regard $foot_2$ as a secondary, but related, meaning of $foot_1$.

A secondary criterion is **etymology,** i.e. a word's origins and history, though it is important not to confuse synchronic and diachronic analysis because, as we saw in Chapter 3, a native speaker does not need to know the history of his/her language to speak it fluently. For example, the term *right* as the antonym of *left* ($right_1$) and in its meaning of 'correct' or 'proper' ($right_2$), is often viewed by lexicographers as an example of polysemy rather than homonymy, on the grounds that right-handedness and the right side used to be associated with moral virtue (e.g. in the expression *seated at the right hand of the Father*), in contrast to the negative connotations of the word *sinister*, which retains its historical meaning of 'left' in heraldry. The historical link argues for a polysemic interpretation, even if few people maintain such prejudices today. Relatedness of meaning generally trumps etymology in such judgements, however: *pupil* as 'schoolchild' and in the sense of 'part of the eyeball' are in fact historically related, but the meanings have now diverged to the point where no English speaker readily makes a connection between the two.

METONYMS AND MERONYMS

The example of *foot*$_2$ above illustrates a particular kind of sense relation, in which a word associated with another is used to stand for it: this is termed **metonymy**, and the relationship here is between a part and its whole (cf. *the **head** of the company*, or indeed *the **head** of a phrase*). In other cases, the relationship is between a symbol and the institution, place or person it represents, for example *the White House* for the US President or *Downing Street* for the UK Prime Minister. Other relationships of metonymy might involve, for example, a container and its contents, as in *he was overly fond of the bottle* meaning 'he was partial to the bottle's alcoholic contents'. A metonym generally has a symbolic relationship with what it denotes (a head of department is not a literal 'head', obviously), but the term **meronym** refers to something which constitutes a part of something else, e.g. *arm* is a meronym of *body*.

Spotlight: Homonymy- and polysemy-based humour

Homonymy and polysemy have always been a rich source of humour. Jokes based on homonymy are known as 'puns', and English, with its wealth of homonyms, provides plenty of potential for humorous word play. Puns tend to elicit laughs or groans, but rarely a neutral response: some people like being awakened to sense relations in language while others do not. One of the leading exponents of pun-based humour is Milton Jones, whose work draws on surprising or unexpected connections between homophonous (or near-homophonous) words, or different senses of polysemous ones:

'I phoned up the spiritual leader of Tibet, and he sent a large goat with a long neck. Turned out I'd phoned Dial-a-Llama'.

'If they make it illegal to wear the veil at work, bee-keepers are going to be furious.'

'The pollen count. That's a difficult job.'

'Incredible to think, isn't it, that every single Scotsman started off as a Scotch egg.'

'Years ago I used to supply filofaxes to the Mafia. I was involved in very organized crime.'

Semantic features

The terminology above provides a useful toolkit for the description of sense relations between lexemes, but does not amount to anything resembling a theory of semantics or to an understanding of how meaning is constructed at the lexical level. We have seen how sentences can be broken down into constituents, morphemes, and ultimately phonemes: might meaning, too, be analysed in terms of more basic semantic components? This is the principle behind an approach to semantics known as **componential analysis**, which starts from the assumption that meanings can be decomposed into bundles of binary semantic features, comparable to the distinctive features of phonology (see Chapter 5). For example, *dog* and *puppy* might be distinguished by their specification for the feature ±[ADULT], *dog* being +[ADULT] and *puppy* –[ADULT]; similarly, the distinction between *dog* and *bitch* could be captured by a feature ±[MALE] or ±[FEMALE]. These features could be used to distinguish *man/woman/boy/girl*; *father/mother*; *duck/drake/duckling* and so on, while ±[HUMAN] could be used to differentiate *man*, *woman*, *grandmother* from animals, all of which could be distinguished from non-living things, such as *book*, *lamp*, *car*, by ±[ANIMATE].

A partial feature matrix based on these features is illustrated below. Note that +[HUMAN] entails +[ANIMATE], and only items marked +[ANIMATE] can have a specification for +/-[ADULT] or +/-[MALE]. The symbol Ø indicates that a lexeme is unspecified for a particular feature.

Table 9.1: A partial semantic feature matrix

	lamp	puppy	girl	woman	man
Animate	–	+	+	+	+
Human	–	–	+	+	+
Adult	Ø	–	–	+	+
Male	Ø	Ø	–	–	+

This approach has a number of theoretical attractions. Firstly, it offers a technical definition for many of the sense relations we explored earlier. A **hyponym**, for example, can be said to contain all the features of its **hypernym**, and some more besides: while *person*, for example, is +[ANIMATE], +[HUMAN],

woman is additionally –[MALE] or +[FEMALE] according to the feature system employed. Features can also capture common relationships between sets of lexemes in the same way as distinctive features in phonology (as we saw in Chapter 5) capture the relationships between pairs of sounds. So, just as the members of the pairs /b/-/p/, /g/-/k/, /d/-/t/ differ in their specification for the feature ±[VOICE], so *dog-puppy*, *woman-girl*, *horse-foal*, *pig-piglet* differ in their specification for the semantic feature ±[ADULT], the former of each pair having a positive and the latter a negative value.

Semantic features can help refine our grammatical description, too. Consider the examples below:

1 *Much coins

2 ?Two muds

3 The pelican read the newspaper.

The ungrammaticality of the first example could be explained by a requirement that the quantifier *much* can only collocate with nouns having a negative value for the feature ±[COUNT]. Similarly, for example 2, nouns marked –[COUNT] cannot normally be collocated with numerals, or with *many*. Where they are, as in this case, the hearer will try where possible to reinterpret the noun itself as +[COUNT] and meaning 'type of' (hence 'two good wines', 'my three favourite cheeses'). Finally, example 3 is perfectly grammatical according to the syntax of English, but pragmatically odd. The oddity could be explained by positing a specification for the verb *to read* that its subject will be marked +[HUMAN]: this requirement could only be overridden in a fictional or hypothetical world in which pelicans can and do read newspapers.

Similarly, we could posit within a grammar of English a feature ±[SOLID] associated with nouns such as *timber*, *wood*, *paper*, *glass*, and require of verbs like *cut*, *sever*, *rip*, *knock*, *tap* or *drill* that they collocate only with nouns with a positive value for this feature, thereby ruling out **he severed the water* or **he knocked on the gas*. Regularities between verbs such as *kill*, *cultivate*, *incite*, *inspire* might be explored using a meaning component ±[CAUSE]: *kill*, for example, has been analysed as +[CAUSE] +[COME ABOUT] –[ALIVE]. Hopes were raised that, as in

phonology, meaning might be reducible to a basic set of semantic features or **meaning primes**, applicable to all natural languages.

For all their initial promise, semantic features soon proved to be limited in their theoretical scope. Let us return again to nouns in our table above, which we noted were only partly specified. *Puppy* is +[ANIMATE], –[HUMAN], –[ADULT], but this specification would do also for *kitten*, *duckling*, *foal*, *cub*, and the young of other animals. Likewise, the specification –[ANIMATE], –[HUMAN], for *lamp* would fit any inanimate object we cared to name. To distinguish, for example, *puppy* and *kitten* we have to posit a specific feature for each, perhaps ±[CANINE] or ±[FELINE], but these begin to look more like *ad hoc* creations for the relevant lexical sets (*dog/mongrel/bitch/spaniel…* and *cat/tabby/moggy/tiger…* respectively), rather than genuine semantic primes with explanatory power outside a restricted domain.

In similar vein, a partial feature analysis for the verb *assassinate* might be +[CAUSE], +[COME ABOUT] –[ALIVE] as suggested above for *kill*, but we would have to specify that its object be marked +[IMPORTANT PUBLIC FIGURE] or suchlike to capture, however approximately, the difference between the two verbs, which again looks a little contrived and is not obviously generalizable to other lexical items. More complex still would be a feature specification to distinguish the connotative meanings of *sweat* and *perspiration*, for example, or the distinction between the verbs *demand*, *ask* and *request*.

Extending the concept of semantic features beyond a promising but small number of putative semantic 'primes' leads to a proliferation of features applicable only to individual lexical items, and a feature set which is in fact almost as large as the lexicon itself. We are, in effect, doing little more than offering fancy formal definitions for the words involved. Semantics ultimately seems too culture-specific for a universal feature set to be applicable and semantic features which are important in one language may not be in another. As we saw in Chapter 6, Dyirbal has a semantically motivated noun class for 'women, fire and dangerous things', while in Navajo, a native American language spoken in Southern USA, verbal suffixes vary according to whether the noun object is + or –[FLEXIBLE].

Key idea: Componential analysis

Componential analysis breaks down lexemes into their meaning components, e.g. man as +[ADULT] +[HUMAN] +[MALE].

Other types of meaning

Not all meaning conveys propositional content, i.e. information or an opinion about the state of the world. For example, when Kermit the Frog uttered the immortal words: 'Good grief! The comedian's a bear!' his opening exclamation 'Good grief!' conveyed no meaning which can be expressed in terms of truth conditions, but rather an **expressive** (or **affective**) meaning, indicating his feelings about the event he is reporting.

Arguably, most if not all utterances carry an element of expressive meaning, which is not always easy to disentangle from the propositional meaning. 'He's running for President', for example, looks like a statement, but uttered with a rising tone at the end and perhaps a stress on the final word, it might convey incredulity or disbelief on the part of the speaker ('He's running for PRESIDENT?!').

Another kind of meaning is what many linguists call **phatic communion,** which encompasses those seemingly meaningless pleasantries which in many societies are important ways of signalling shared membership of a community. When someone asks 'How are you?' in most cases he/she is not looking for a detailed account of your current state of health: it's simply a social ritual designed to show that you matter as a human being.

Key idea: Affective and social meaning

Some types of meaning do not lend themselves readily to analysis in terms of semantic components. These include expressive or **affective** meaning (a speaker's feelings about what is said), and **phatic communion** (social rather than propositional meaning).

Fact-check

1 Entailments define the sense relationship of what?
- **a** Hyponymy
- **b** Metonymy
- **c** Synonymy
- **d** Antonymy

2 Which of the following pairs are not gradable antonyms?
- **a** High/low
- **b** Bright/dull
- **c** Male/female
- **d** Thin/thick

3 Which of the following is an antonym of man?
- **a** Woman
- **b** Boy
- **c** Neither
- **d** Both

4 Which of the following is a hyponym of fish?
- **a** Perch
- **b** Animal
- **c** Bird
- **d** Whale

5 For which of the following sense relationships is it true that 'not X entails Y'?
- **a** Gradable antonyms
- **b** Synonyms
- **c** Complementaries
- **d** Reversives

6 *Help* and *aid* are what?
- **a** Antonyms
- **b** Total synonyms
- **c** Partial synonyms
- **d** Meronyms

7 Which of these is an example of metonymy?

a The White House has vetoed the proposal
b Time flies like an arrow
c The long and winding road
d He has an inflated opinion of himself

8 Which of these has the partial feature specification –[ADULT] –[MALE]?

a Granddaughter
b Daughter
c Girl
d All of the above

9 Which of the gradable antonyms in bold below is stylistically marked?

a **long**/short
b empty/**full**
c **old**/young
d high/**low**

10 Which of the following best illustrates phatic communion?

a Good heavens above!
b You must be joking!
c Good morning!
d Delighted to hear your news!

Dig deeper

P. Elbourne, *Meaning: A Slim Guide to Semantics* (Oxford University Press, 2011) is clear, accessible and illustrated with excellent examples and good humour.

J. Hurford, B. Heasley & M. Smith, *Semantics: a Coursebook* (2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2007 – previous edition as Hurford and Heasley, 1983), esp. Parts 1–3

G. Leech, *Semantics* (Pelican, 1974) esp. Chapters 1–4, 6 & 11

F. Palmer, *Semantics* (2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. Chapters 1, 2, 4 & 5

J. Saeed, *Semantics* (3rd edition, Blackwell, 2009), esp. Chapters 1, 3, 4 & 9

Online sources

Wikipedia article on 'Linguistic relativity': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_relativity

Colour terms

The question of colour terminology is analysed in depth in Berlin and Kay's classic work *Basic Color Terms* (1969); excellent more recent studies include V. Loreto, A. Mukherjee & Francesca Tria (2012) 'On the origin of the hierarchy of color names', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PANS), 109(18), 6819–24. Available online: www.pnas.org/content/109/18/6819. See also M. Dowman (2007) 'Explaining Color Term Typology With an Evolutionary Model', *Cognitive Science* 31: 99–132. (Available online: www.lel.ed.ac.uk/~mdowman/explaining-color-term-typology.pdf)

10

Pragmatics: saying what you mean

The hypothetical Martian visitor to whom we alluded briefly in Chapter 1 would no doubt be bemused by many aspects of language: not least its complexity and diversity, and the amazing skill demonstrated by young humans in acquiring it. But perhaps most perplexing of all would be the very nature of interactions in which language is used. In spite of the fact that conversation is riddled with non-sequiturs, apparently uninformative contributions and blatant irrelevance, human beings appear to communicate very well.

The way in which meaning is produced and understood in context is the subject matter of **pragmatics**. As we will see in this chapter, we all use conversational 'short cuts' to make interaction more efficient. Since these short cuts can only work if we share an assumption that conversation is a co-operative exercise, we will consider models of co-operation and politeness which help us understand how successful interaction takes place.

As we will see, there is much more to conversation than the simple communication of factual information. We use language to perform actions, too: *I promise*, or *I bet you*, for example, by their very utterance imply a commitment on the part of the speaker; many people find it difficult to say *I'm sorry*, because much more than mere words is involved. The model of **speech acts** we present later in the chapter outlines the conditions required for such utterances to be successfully made.

Meaning in context

Consider the following exchanges:

(1) Paul: Can you put the washing out?

Sarah: It's raining!

Paul: OK.

(2) Sally: Has Sarah revealed her takeover plans?

Lynn: She's keeping her cards close to her chest.

Sally: Ah, I suspected as much.

(3) Sarah: You can't sack your own brother-in-law!

Alan: Business is business!

(4) Steve: Could you tell me the time?

Claire: Yes, it's twenty past four.

(5) Dad: Were you born in a barn?

Daughter: (*Closes the door*)

If you're a native speaker of English, none of these exchanges will seem particularly odd: it is only when we stop and think about them that their strangeness becomes apparent. In the first two examples, the response appears to bear no relation to the question actually posed, yet Paul accepts Sarah's response in (1) as an answer to his request, while in (2), Lynn's apparently irrelevant reply, about a card game which has not even been mentioned, is interpreted by Sally as a helpful contribution. Alan's reply to Sarah in (3) is a tautology, and therefore appears to convey no information whatsoever. We probably don't even notice that Claire's response to Steve's question in (4) does not actually address the question posed ('*Could* you tell me…'), which formally seems to require a yes or no answer. Finally, communication appears to have broken down completely between Dad and Daughter in (5), where Dad's question receives no answer at all, Daughter choosing to close a door instead.

How can meaningful communication emerge from what seems to be chaotically disorganized interaction? And why is communication so often oblique, when more direct alternatives

are available? (For example, if you want someone to close a door for you, as in (5), why not simply use the imperative verb form, designed specifically for this purpose, and say 'Close the door!'?).

Conversational 'short cuts' of the kind illustrated above all ultimately serve to make interaction more efficient, by exploiting speakers' shared knowledge and experience. They can only work because of a simple assumption that humans share in conversation, namely that they are engaged in a co-operative exercise. We will examine the consequences of this **co-operative principle** and look more closely at **speech acts**, in which language is used (as in (4) or (5)) not merely to communicate information but to achieve a particular purpose.

Co-operation generally prospers when participants in an interaction endeavour not to offend each other, i.e. they try to be polite. Later in the chapter, we will consider a model of politeness developed by two linguists, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, and its consequences for our understanding of language in context. But we begin with the work of the philosopher Paul Grice, whose co-operative principle provides a framework for understanding many of the mysteries of conversation.

Grice's theory of implicature

Much of Grice's work explores different kinds of meaning, and in particular the difference between what a speaker says and what he/she **implicates.** What Grice termed **implicatures** go beyond what is actually said: for example in (5) above, what appears to be a question about a person's birthplace is interpreted (correctly) by the hearer as meaning 'close the door'. Implicatures can be inferred from a general principle of conversation, which he set out as follows:

THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

'Make your 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'.

The principle can be broken down into four **maxims of conversation** (though Grice suggested that this might not be an exhaustive list):

1 The maxim of quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:

do not say what you believe to be false

do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

2 The maxim of quantity

Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

3 The maxim of relevance (or relation)

Make your contributions relevant.

4 The maxim of manner

Be perspicuous, and specifically:

avoid obscurity

avoid ambiguity

be brief

be orderly.

> *...[We] need first to get clear on the character of Grice's maxims. They are not sociological generalizations about speech, nor are they moral prescriptions or proscriptions on what to say or communicate. Although Grice presented them in the form of guidelines for how to communicate successfully, I think they are better construed as presumptions about utterances, presumptions that we as listeners rely on and as speakers exploit.*
>
> (Bach 2006: 5)

It is important to understand what the principle and its maxims are and, equally importantly, what they are not. They are not rules, like grammatical rules: it is possible to violate them – sometimes deliberately and ostentatiously so – and our **utterance** (the term employed to signify a spoken contribution in

context) will still be understood. Nor are they social imperatives of the 'don't forget to say please and thank you' kind, though they are a kind of social convention which we unconsciously acquire as we learn to use language.

What the principle and maxims amount to is a very robust set of assumptions that participants make about the conversation in which they are engaged, which are often maintained even in the face of evidence that co-operation has broken down. So even where, for example, a speaker's contribution to an interaction appears irrelevant, a hearer will generally assume that it was *intended* as relevant, and strive to find an interpretation which fits the purposes of the current exchange. Similarly, it hardly needs saying that speakers do not always speak the truth as the maxim of quality requires, but conversation nonetheless proceeds on the assumption that contributions are truthful, unless and until that assumption becomes untenable (see Case study below).

Key idea: The co-operative principle

According to Grice's co-operative principle, conversation can only proceed while participants assume each other to be co-operating. This assumption is so strong that they will endeavour to interpret each other's contributions as co-operative, even when superficially they appear not to be.

Case study: Good cop, bad cop

A staple of TV detective dramas is the 'good cop, bad cop' interrogation, in which two police officers interview a young, and usually naive, petty crook implicated in a major criminal enterprise. The good cop typically offers to help him avoid jail in return for evidence against the criminal masterminds, while the bad cop reminds him of the predicament in which he finds himself, as in the following dialogue (which unfortunately did not quite make it to *The Sweeney* in the late 1970s):

Good cop: Well now, Tommy: you're in a bit of bother...

Tommy: I don't know what you're talking about.

Good cop: Why don't you tell me about 'Mr Big'?

Tommy: Never heard of him.

Good cop: Come, come, Tommy: let's not play games. You know we've got you on CCTV, and we've got three witnesses who saw you with him the night of the robbery.

Tommy: Sorry, I wish I could help you, but I don't know a thing. Honest.

Good cop: This is getting us nowhere, Tommy...

Bad cop: With your previous, you're looking at six years inside....

Good cop: But play nicely, and we can make all this go away.

Tommy (*sweating*): Look... I'd like to help...it's just that... Mr Big...he knows where my mum lives...

In Gricean terms, such dialogues are about maintenance of the co-operation principle. The hapless interviewee attempts to convince his interrogators that he is adhering to the maxims of quantity and quality ('I don't know a thing. Honest.'), but the evidence against him makes this pretence unsustainable. The good cop reminds him that dialogue is in his interests, but can only continue if the assumption of co-operation can be maintained ('This is getting us nowhere'). The bad cop, meanwhile, stresses the negative consequences of it breaking down ('six years inside...'). Faced with an unpalatable choice, the interviewee may change tack, as here, by suggesting that he would *like* to co-operate, but has good reasons for not being able to. What is remarkable is that, even in adversarial interactions, all parties strive to maintain at least the illusion that they are co-operating.

Grice's formulation of the maxims is rather terse, so it is worth looking at how each works in practice. The **quality** maxim, as we saw above, does not make the ridiculous claim that human beings do not lie: it simply means that conversation can only proceed if participants can work on the assumption that both parties are telling the truth, or at least, *can sustain a convincing pretence that they are doing so*. The second sub-maxim means that both parties need to be able to assume that their interlocutor is not saying anything which he/she has does

not have good reason to believe is true, but conversation may break down because interlocutors disagree on what constitutes 'adequate evidence'. For this reason, speakers may choose to use **hedges**, to warn their interlocutors that they do not believe themselves fully able to satisfy the requirements of the quality (or of another) maxim.

In the exchange below, for example, David's use of the common maxim hedge 'Well' sends an advance signal to John that he is not sure he can properly answer John's question, but that he has *some* evidence that offers a partial answer:

John: Has Fiona recovered from her illness?

David: Well, I saw her at a party on Saturday.

The maxim of **quantity** amounts to a requirement that we provide just enough information (and no more) for the purposes of the talk exchange in which we are involved. So, a reply to question 'What did you do yesterday?' which begins:

> 'I got up at 7.52 and 30 seconds and got out of bed to go into the bathroom where I had a shower, wearing a shower cap to keep my hair dry and then dried myself off with a large towel with a map of Lanzarote on it and came downstairs at 7.57 and 44 seconds and put some toast in the toaster while putting the kettle on for a cup of tea. I went into the hall to pick up my newspaper and read the sports pages at the breakfast table, and then I put a 1-mm layer of orange marmalade on my toast and drank my coffee with no milk and two sugar cubes in it…'

would generally be excessive, though there are contexts (for example, when making a statement to the police) where some of this detail might be appropriate. The common cry of 'Too much information!' uttered when a person has offered excessive, inappropriate or embarrassing detail, is a good illustration of how conversational misjudgements are informally policed, reminding participants to observe the norms of the quantity maxim in a way that others find acceptable.

The meaning of the maxim of **relevance** (or **relation**) appears simple and self-explanatory, though of course we do not have a

watertight definition of what 'relevance' actually means, which perhaps explains why interlocutors will strain to interpret contributions as relevant even when superficially they appear not to be. Speakers may also disagree, or pretend to disagree, on what constitutes 'relevance' for the purposes of the current exchange (see Case study overleaf). Conversation will quickly break down when a participant signals his/her inability, or unwillingness, to offer a relevant contribution, as any parent who has tried to prise information from children about what they have done at school today will know.

Finally, the maxim of **manner** simply requires participants to be as clear as they are able to be. Part of that clarity is being brief (an interlocutor will assume that if 'John' and 'the man from the council who inspects hygiene standards in fast food outlets and is also my grandfather' are one and the same person, you will choose 'John' unless you have good reason for not doing so) and being orderly, i.e. reporting events or actions in the appropriate order. For example, the two sentences below convey exactly the same information, and are grammatically well formed, but the second seems pragmatically odd (indicated conventionally by a preceding question mark), because the assumption is that the actions should take place in the order they are given, even though this is not explicitly stated:

- *To make chips, peel your potatoes, cut them into long strips and fry them in cooking oil heated to 180°C.*
- *?To make chips, fry your potatoes in oil heated to 180°C, cut them into strips and peel them.*

The sub-maxim 'Be orderly' offers a good illustration of the difference between **entailments**, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, are aspects of meaning which are true in all possible worlds, and **implicatures**, which are a context-dependent overlay on semantic meaning. The semantics of both the above sentences are the same, but the order of the actions is an **implicature** that flows from the assumption that the speaker is observing the sub-maxim 'Be orderly'.

Case study: The pragmatics of political interviews

The next time you hear a politician challenged to 'answer the question' in a television interview, you can be fairly sure that he/she is attempting to stretch the notion of 'relevant' beyond what the interviewer and audience are likely to find acceptable, by answering a different question to the one posed, and is being dragged back to observance of the maxim of **relevance** by the interviewer. In fact, the jousting match between a skilled interviewer and an experienced politician often amounts to an attempt by the former to force compliance with Grice's maxims on the latter.

While the politician may have a strong interest in violating the maxims (for example by being obscure or ambiguous about unpopular policies), he/she is also aware of the strong countervailing pressure to observe them, and therefore often attempts to convince the audience of his/her intention to do so. When a politician prefaces remarks with 'Let me be clear', for example, it's usually a sign that the maxim of **manner** is about to be violated. Many of the interviewer's stock responses, on the other hand, can be interpreted as demanding of the interviewee that the maxims be observed:

'But, Prime Minister, all the available evidence suggests this policy isn't working…' (quality)

'Your government does not seem to want to talk about unemployment' (quantity)

'I must press you to address the point the listener has made' (relevance)

'You haven't been clear, have you, Prime Minister, about who will actually benefit from this proposal?' (manner)

Politicians' words are a matter of public record and are regularly tested for their honesty and consistency. As this famous exchange between Jeremy Paxman and ex-Home Secretary Michael Howard demonstrates, a politician would therefore rather violate manner by being obscure than run the risk of openly violating quality by being untruthful. Paxman actually asked the same question no fewer than 14 times before coining the word 'obfuscommunication', which we

might define as 'persistent and deliberate failure to observe the quantity maxim'.

Paxman: Did you threaten Derek Lewis?

Howard: I was not entitled to instruct Derek Lewis and I did not instruct him. And –

Paxman: Did you threaten to overrule him?

Howard: The truth of the matter is that Mr Marriott was not suspended. I did not –

Paxman: Did you threaten to overrule him?

Howard: I did not overrule Derek Lewis.

Paxman: Did you threaten to overrule him?

Howard: I took advice.

Paxman: You're a master of obfuscommunication, Mr Howard.

A similar gap between entailment and implicature is evident in the logical and real-world use of numbers. Few people, for example, would argue with the statement 'If both teams score two goals, the result is a draw'. Yet, when presented with the (unlikely) scoreline 'West Ham United 6 Barcelona 2', all English speakers agree that this is *not* a drawn game on the above definition, even though both teams have, quite clearly, scored two goals (one of them with four more to spare). The entailment of 'two' ('at least two') differs from the implicature ('two and only two') which flows from observance of the quantity maxim: we assume that, if the speaker had meant 'at least two', he/she would have said so and that in normal circumstances 'two' means 'two and only two'.

An important property of implicatures is that, unlike entailments, they are **defeasible**, i.e. they can be cancelled:

Q: Did you give £50 to *Children in Need*?

A: Yes, in fact I gave £100.

?A: Yes, in fact I gave £49.

In the first reply, the implicature ('£50 exactly') is overridden by the 'in fact…' clause, but the entailment ('at least £50')

cannot be, so the second reply is pragmatically ill formed. The implicature that events follow the sequence in which they are uttered can be cancelled in a similar way:

> *I washed the floor, fed the cat, did the washing-up and watched TV, but not necessarily in that order.*

Finally, Barry Blake (2008: 116) gives the example of Mr Brown meeting Mrs Jones for an illicit tryst at a hotel and being asked by the receptionist: 'Are you married?'. Both reply, truthfully, that they are: the implicature 'married *to each other*' is one which neither party has an interest in cancelling!

Key idea: Defeasible implicatures

Implicatures are context-specific meanings generated by observance (or deliberate flouting) of the four maxims of co-operation. They differ from **entailments** in that they are **defeasible**, i.e. they can be cancelled.

Spotlight: Comedy pragmatics

Much of our humour derives from violation or flouting of Grice's maxims. A celebrated example is the *Mrs Merton Show* interview with Debbie McGee, in which Mrs Merton (Caroline Aherne) asked: 'What was it that first attracted you to the millionaire Paul Daniels?'. By flouting the maxim of quantity ('Do not make your contribution more informative than required'), she invited the audience to look for an interpretation in which the additional superfluous information ('the millionaire') was in fact required for the purposes of the exchange (in this case something along the lines of 'Did you marry Paul Daniels for his money?'). Since this meaning was an implicature, it could of course have been plausibly denied.

In the scene in *Alvin and the Chipmunks* where the eponymous heroes first meet their carer Dave, humour arises not from a surfeit of information but from a lack of it, violating the quantity maxim in a different way. The three introduce themselves thus:

Simon: We're getting off on the wrong foot. Allow us to introduce ourselves. Hello. I'm Simon. The smart one. He's Alvin...

Alvin: ...the awesomest one!

Theodore: And I'm Theodore.

The first two introductions set up the expectation that, for the purposes of this exchange, a name and exceptional personal quality is required. The suggestion here is that Theodore is unable to observe 'quantity' here, because he cannot think of an exceptional quality to boast about!

Flouting the maxims

Thus far we have assumed that the co-operative principle and individual maxims are generally observed, with the risk that conversation will break down if they are violated. But the evidence with which we began the chapter suggests this is a gross oversimplification. Interactants frequently and blatantly infringe the maxims without negative consequences for communication, for example in (1) and (2) above, where the responses appear to violate the relevance maxim by bearing no relation to the question posed, or in (3), where the tautologous sentence appears to violate the maxim of quantity by being completely uninformative.

In cases like these, the maxims are not so much infringed as **flouted**: the speaker does not merely violate the maxim concerned, he/she does so ostentatiously and thereby actively sends a signal to an interlocutor that co-operation is in fact being maintained at a deeper level. Thus in (1) Paul interprets Sarah's seemingly irrelevant reply as meaning: 'I'm flouting the maxim of relation by referring to rain rather than washing. What connection about rain and washing do you draw, from our shared real-world experience, which might be construed as an answer to your request?' and infers the implicature 'I can't put the washing out, because it would get even more wet if I did so.'

As listeners, we presume that the speaker is being co-operative (at least insofar as he is trying to make his communicative intention evident) and is speaking truthfully, informatively,

relevantly, and otherwise appropriately. If an utterance appears not to conform to any of these presumptions, the listener looks for a way of taking it so that it does conform. As speakers, in trying to choose words to make our intention evident, we exploit the fact that our listeners presume these things.
(Bach 2006: 6)

Metaphor works in a similar way, as in (2) above:

Sally: Has Sarah revealed her takeover plans?

Lynn: She's keeping her cards close to her chest.

Lynn's response is obviously irrelevant, on a literal level, to the question posed, but the co-operation principle is robust enough to induce the hearer to interpret it as relevant by looking for common ground between the two contributions. Sarah's secret plans are likened to the cards held by a poker player, to be revealed, if at all, only at the moment of maximum advantage.

Finally, tautologous statements like Alan's reply in (3) 'Business is business' (compare 'Boys will be boys') advertise their own lack of informativeness so blatantly as to suggest that it must be a deliberate choice on the part of the speaker, which invites the addressee to look for ways in which they might at some level be co-operative. This particular tautology is conventionally interpreted as meaning something like 'The rules of successful business are unchanging and leave no room for sentiment', satisfying the quantity maxim obliquely.

Skilled speakers exploit the potential of flouts to achieve a variety of ends. In (6), below, manner (here the sub-maxim 'Be brief') is deliberately violated to cast doubt on John's culinary prowess:

(6) Paul: Did John cook you dinner last night?

Mary: He handed over a plate containing items which could be described as food, some of which had been heated in an oven. Some of it was edible.

The answer Mary appears to be groping for is 'Yes', but her wordy failure to offer it invites Paul to draw the appropriate conclusion.