

PETER LANG

VOL. 32

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES IN DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS

# LINGUISTIC MEANING AND NON-TRUTH- CONDITIONALITY

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## Introduction: Linguistic Semantics and Meaning

### 1. Introduction

This book involves the study of non-truth-conditional meaning. It covers a number of areas which are traditionally seen as falling outside truth-conditional semantics proper, including conventional implicatures, sentence adverbials, parentheticals, discourse connectives of various types, and mood indicators. It considers a number of approaches to these phenomena and attempts to place the discussion in a theoretical and historical context.

Traditionally, the study of this type of meaning has been overshadowed by a presumption that linguistic meaning should fall squarely within truth-conditional semantics. In this view, language was seen as providing a direct link between words and objects in the world, offering us a way of describing states of affairs. The meaning of those descriptions would then be captured in terms of the conditions that would have to hold in the world for a given utterance to be true (i.e. its truth-conditions). However, since the 1950s it has become increasingly clear that language is not only used to describe the world but also to perform other functions. It has been shown that these additional roles give rise to a number of counterexamples against the truth-conditional approach. The main objection has been that many linguistic expressions, such as non-declarative mood indicators, connectives, or sentence adverbials, do not describe states of affairs in the world, but rather perform actions or modify different aspects of verbal communication. As a result, their contributions to meaning cannot be accounted for within truth-conditional semantics. Instead, it has been argued that they should be seen as falling within *non*-truth-conditional semantics.

A number of new approaches have been proposed to analyse non-truth-conditional meaning, in particular, Speech Act theory (Searle 1969) and the Gricean framework (Grice 1989), which in this book are treated as the main traditional approaches to non-truth-conditional semantics. Speech act theory proposes that non-truth-conditional meaning arises as a result of using language to perform actions, and has been applied to all the phenomena covered in this book, except connectives, which have been studied within the Gricean framework. In this respect, Grice proposed a notion of conventional implicature, which dealt with the type of meaning conveyed by connectives, and subsequently combined it with speech act descriptions to give rise to a more integrated account of non-truth-conditional semantics.

However, these traditional approaches face a number of problems. In particular, they fail to make the correct distinction between sentences and utterances; their semantic characterisations seem to be descriptively inadequate; and they also fail to capture the complexity and variety of linguistic meaning available, all of which suggests that an alternative account is needed.

This book considers an alternative approach based on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), which proposes a new semantic and pragmatic account of non-truth-conditional meaning based on a number of key concepts. In particular, we will discuss the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning, which will enable us to capture the varieties of non-truth-conditional meaning encoded in language. We will also explore the distinction between explicit and implicit communication, which will allow us to examine the impact of non-truth-conditional phenomena on verbal communication. Finally, we will consider the distinction between descriptive and interpretive uses of language, which will enable us to characterise the types of propositional attitude involved in the analysis of mood indicators in particular and non-truth-conditional meaning more generally. These distinctions will lay the foundations for an explanatory account of non-truth-conditional semantics that will avoid the problems encountered by earlier approaches.

The book comprises three different parts and is organised as follows. The first part involves examining traditional approaches to non-truth-conditional meaning, particularly the speech act and the Gricean approaches. The second part covers a discussion of new developments in linguistics semantics within the relevance-theoretic framework. Finally, the third part involves an application of this new approach to the full range of non-truth-conditional phenomena mentioned above.

In what follows, an overview is provided of each of these three sections, starting with the traditional approaches to non-truth-conditional meaning.

## 2. Traditional Approaches to Non-Truth-Conditional Meaning

### *2.1. Semantics and Linguistic Meaning*

Up until the 1950s it was widely believed that language was used primarily to provide descriptions of the world. This allowed us to make a direct link between words and states of affairs in the world. As a result, it was possible to claim that the meaning of a sentence was the set of conditions that would have to hold true in the world for an utterance of that sentence to be true. This became known as the truth-conditional approach to semantics, which is discussed in chapter 2.

However, it quickly became apparent that focusing exclusively on the descriptive side of language raises a number of problems for such an account of linguistics semantics. In particular, the main issue is that it disregards other functions of language that do not involve descriptions of the world (e.g. non-declarative moods, sentence adverbials, etc.). This restricts its coverage to just a subset of linguistic phenomena and, more importantly, would exclude all the linguistic expressions covered in this book, thereby giving rise to a partial theory of linguistic meaning at best.

These problems led to the development of new approaches to non-truth-conditional meaning, which included, particularly, speech act theory and the Gricean framework. They are covered in chapters 3 and 4 of the book respectively.

### *2.2. Speech Act Theory and Non-Truth-Conditional Semantics*

Speech act theory was one of the first approaches developed to account for non-truth-conditional semantics. Its main claim was that language can be used not only to describe states of affairs in the world but also to perform speech acts in verbal communication. It argued that speech act information falls outside the descriptive truth-conditional content in utterance interpretation and thus should be treated as *non*-truth-conditional.

This approach has been applied to a wide range of non-truth-conditional phenomena, including mood indicators, sentence adverbials, and parentheticals. However, a number of problems have been found, which question its viability as an approach to non-truth-conditional semantics. The main problem is that it attempts to capture the performance of speech acts within semantics (sentences), whereas the evidence available seems to suggest that speech acts should be accounted for within pragmatics (utterances), not semantics. Another problem is that it was not meant to cover certain types of non-truth-conditional phenomena (e.g. connectives), which means that other approaches need to be used to complement its theoretical machinery, thus limiting its viability as an independent approach.

One of the additional approaches used to complement speech act theory was the framework proposed by Grice, which was applied particularly to connectives.

### *2.3. Grice, Conventional Implicatures and Non-Truth-Conditional Semantics*

Grice argued that the meaning of pragmatic or discourse connectives cannot be captured in truth-conditional terms. In particular, he argued that these

expressions encode non-truth-conditional meaning, and proposed a notion of conventional implicature to account for it. For example, he claimed that the connectives 'but' and 'therefore' encode conventional implicatures of contrast and explanation.

In his later work, he (1989) attempted to combine his account of connectives with speech act theory. In particular, he claimed that in verbal communication speakers can perform two types of speech act: one central and the other non-central. Central speech acts involve the performance of basic functions such as asserting, asking, or telling (relating to declarative, interrogative and imperative moods respectively), and contribute to the truth-conditions of the utterances in question. By contrast, non-central speech acts involve the performance of non-basic functions, e.g. contrasting, adding, etc., and don't contribute to truth-conditions. He argued that connectives are normally associated with non-central speech acts and as a result should be treated as non-truth-conditional. For example, the connective 'but' is used to indicate a (non-truth-conditional) contrast between two (truth-conditional) assertions (i.e. the central speech acts performed).

However, there are a number of problems with Grice's account. In particular, Grice seems to make contradictory claims about the analysis of connectives and it is not clear whether his framework is able to capture their contribution to utterance interpretation. Similarly, it is not clear that all connectives are non-truth-conditional, as Grice suggests. There seems to be evidence that some connectives do contribute to the truth-conditional content of the utterances in which they appear.

These problems seem to suggest that the Gricean framework may not be a viable approach to non-truth-conditional semantics after all and that an alternative account is needed. In particular, a new analysis would benefit from developing new distinctions to achieve a more descriptively adequate level. This will be covered in the second part of the book, where we consider a new approach based on assumptions developed within relevance theory.