

7.x. Pragmatics: Unspoken Premises

We return now to a topic first addressed in Informal Logic: determining which premises were assumed but left unstated in an argument. We settled on three factors guiding our recovery of such unstated premises.

- 1. Validity:** The added premise(s) should make the argument valid
- 2. Simplicity:** The added premise(s) should be as simple as possible (that is: the simplest set of premises rendering the argument valid).
- 3. No Useless Sentences:** No sentences in the argument should be useless to reaching the conclusion validly. (In particular: none of the explicitly stated premises in the argument should be rendered useless by the added, unstated premises.)

Of the three, the No Useless Sentences principle has already been seen as a side-effect of one or more of the Grice Maxims: the Maxim of Quantity (don't add useless information) and/or the Maxim of Relevance (don't give irrelevant information).¹ In the current context the No Useless Sentences principle applies to the existing (stated) premises: adding an unstated-but-assumed premise shouldn't render any of the stated premises useless.

But really Simplicity can be swept under the umbrella of the Grice Maxims as well. For what No Useless Sentences imposes on the stated premises, the Simplicity principle imposes on the unstated premises: that there not be more sentences than necessary to render the argument valid. So beyond validity, all of the constraints on restoring (or adding) unstated premises wind up being pragmatic in nature.

Moreover, in everyday communication we find not only a premise, but even a conclusion left unstated – the audience being trusted to add the missing premise(s), and then draw the unstated conclusion. Conditionals (“if... then” sentences and their cousins) offer a nice example.

If there's one thing I don't like, it's someone who cheats at cards.

¹ In 7.x.

If I've learned anything in life, it's that

Unless they've repealed the constitution, you need a warrant to search my house.

I'll do that when pigs fly.

[Plutarch quote about adultery and cow.]

From note, 1.15.17:

adding unstated premises (revisited)

(nb: no occasion in this for new problems; so cover this quickly)

[note: can fold simplicity into nus; should maybe add this observation to 1.10, since it won't add much length.]

this leads into pragmatics and logic: "sixty if he was a if he was a day," "...then I'm Albert Einstein" "who doesn't?"

then: deceptive but true sentences, inferences (various pragmatic examples, leading to conclusion that we need pragmatics as well as semantics to account for this)

close with observation that pragmatics (on top of semantics)

He was sixty if he was a day.

If I know anything, it's how to do logic proofs.

If there's one thing I don't like, it's a liar.

If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times.

If I've learned one thing in life, it's that quitters never win.

So: try writing a reading after the Grice maxims, about unstated premises, rhetorical questions, inferences on the fly.

Unstated Premises
Rhetorical Questions
Inferences on the Fly

Marked Inference Rhetorical Q 12.25.16

Rhetorical Q same as inference marked by markers:

Obvious answer, or obviously assumed unstated premise, isn't obviously true

(Ambiguity / questionableness of "principle of charity" in adding unstated premises.

We need this premise to render the argument valid; but are we so committed to the validity of the speaker's argument that we accept this sentence as true?)

Rhetorical Questions Revisited

Appeal to CG (But also: on-the-fly added sentences, e.g. Kitty wouldn't like the Duomo di Milano)

Possibility of deception

Direct answers

Indirect communication riding on answer

Problems: Just: what's the obvious answer?

"What have you got to lose?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"And who better to do this than Dr. Slim?" [1.1.17: in election ad]

"Is the Pope Catholic?"

"Why would you go anywhere else?"

Common Ground NUS 12.2.16

Maybe add rhetorical questions in discussion of the common ground.

Rhetorical Questions Illicit Inference 7.17.16

With rhetorical questions it's obvious what answer the speaker intends. But it's a trick to treat that obviousness as a sign that the answer is uncontroversially true. That's the sleight of hand involved with rhetorical questions.

"What have you got to lose?"

"Would I lie to you?"

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