COMMUNICATION – A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article attempts to analyse communication from a pragmatic point of view, identifying some of the most important theories and principles that are to be mentioned in relation to this area of studies.

Key words: *communication, sign, speech acts, politeness, cooperative principle*

An attempt to define communication

Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines communication as "the exchange of ideas, information, etc., between two or more persons" (Richards and Schmidt 2010: 97), this simple equation necessarily requiring the presence of at least one speaker (or **sender**), a **message** which is transmitted, and a person or persons for whom the message is intended (the **receiver**). On a similar note, Joann Keyton sees communication as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (qtd. in Lunenburg 2010: 1). According to James Carey (1989: 15), this "transmission view of communication" is the one that prevails in American culture, as well as in all industrial cultures, the approach subsuming a series of terms, such as "imparting," "sending," "transmitting," or "giving information to others."

However, communication is not only **transmission**, but also **production**. In order to send a message, one should first create the message, which means use the proper words or signs (language, in this case, is seen as a semiotic system based on signs through which people communicate or exchange ideas), if verbal communication is meant, or the right gestures or symbols, if non-verbal communication is the one referred to. And this is exactly what James Carey (1989: 23) claims when he defines communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed." Consequently, reality is observed, re-created through language or symbols, and shared among communicators. So, communicating refers to the "dynamic nature of processes that humans use to produce, interpret, and share meaning" (Allen 2011: 10).

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Another component of paramount importance in the process of communication is **meaning**. People do not generally speak or use gestures without a certain purpose or without the intention of being understood (except in some specific cases, such as a certain medical condition, etc.) by their interlocutors. If the sender, the conveyor of the message does not render the proper meaning, and consequently does not manage to trigger off the proper, expected reaction, or the receiver has problems in perceiving the right idea, misunderstandings might appear which finally lead to failure in communication. Thus, communication "occurs whenever someone attributes meaning to another person's words or actions" (Martin and Nakayama 2010: 94).

In their book *International communication in contexts*, Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama (2010: 94-95) consider that communication can be interpreted from a triple perspective. The first one is the **social science perspective** which takes into discussion the components of communication, i.e. the sender(s), the receiver(s), the message, the channel, and the context, also emphasizing the variables or the influences that these elements might exert on the process of communication. For example, people that are acquainted to each other communicate in a certain way, whereas complete strangers have a different way in which they express their opinions; gender is another element worth mentioning, women and men communicating in different ways. Context can also influence communication; a familiar environment gives rise to a certain type of exchange, whereas a formal context leads to a more formal attitude and choice of expression. The second one is the **interpretive perspective**. This focuses on the symbolic nature of communication, which stresses the idea that the words and gestures people use do not possess an "inherent meaning," but an "agreed-upon meaning" that should necessarily be shared by the interlocutors, if efficient communication is to be reached. These symbols or **signs**[1] that people use in order to express themselves are not only verbal, but also nonverbal (gestures, postures, eye contact, facial expressions, etc.), which means that everything needs careful evaluation and interpretation if proper understanding is to be acquired. In addition to this, one should also bear in mind the fact that meaning is rarely singular, one and the same utterance, for example, carrying more layers of meaning, depending on the context in which the words are uttered or used and the intention of the speaker. The message "I feel tired" might have the following meanings (depending on different contexts): "I don't want to make love," "It's time you went home,"

[1] In Linguistics, the **signs** are the words and other expressions of a language which **signify**, that is, "stand for", other things. In English, the word *table*, for instance, stands for a particular piece of furniture in the real world. (Richards and Schmidt 2010: 527)

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"Carry me," "I'm ready to die," "I've done enough work today," or "I'd rather stay in tonight." The interpretive perspective also stresses the idea that meaning, as part of a dynamic process, is something constantly negotiated. Communication requires the presence of people, each participant having or creating his/her own version of reality, thus advancing their own meanings and reality projections to others, this idea taking us back to James Carey's definition of communication which defines it as a process of reality creation, preservation, repair and transformation. The last perspective is the **critical** one. This emphasizes the major role played by societal forces which attribute different values to different statuses people possess. According to this point of view, the voices and symbols people use are rather unequal, being arranged in a "societal hierarchy in which some individual characteristics are more highly valued than others" (Martin and Nakayama 2010: 95). Thus, the message of a police officer carries more weight than that of a teenager, while some social symbols, such as flags, national anthems, and even holy icons (in the case of some religious communities) attract more respect others.

The controversy

The traditional views on human communication are centered on the **code theories** which "treat utterances as encoding messages" (Wilson 1998: 1). According to their point of view, language is a semiotic system, i.e. a system of signs (words) that help people who master it to communicate, exchange ideas, ensure good social relations, etc. These theories are based on the assumption that a communicator who wants to convey a certain message transmits the corresponding signal, which is received and decoded by the audience using an identical copy of the code. Successful code-based communication results in a duplication of messages: the message encoded is identical to the message received. A simple representation of the communication process would include the following elements: the sender, the receiver, the message, the channel or medium (which could be oral or written), and the noise (which in this case refers to anything that might distort the message, i.e. language barriers, emotions, attitudes, interruptions, etc.), Figure 1[2].

[2] Adapted from Fred C. Lunenburg, "Communication: The Process, Barriers, And Improving Effectiveness", 2010, p. 2

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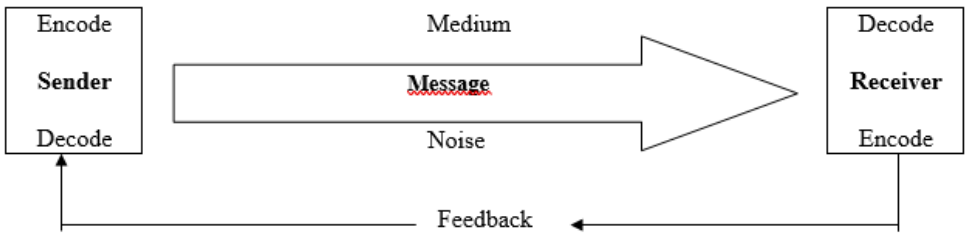


Figure 1. The communication process

This approach interprets communication as a process in which a certain meaning is encoded with the help of a linguistic system and transferred to a hearer who, in order to retrieve its original meaning, simply has to decode it. Consequently, "The roles of the speaker and the hearer in a communicative event are thus reduced to coding and decoding respectively." (Rigotti and Greco 2009: 85)

However, these code theories have undergone a radical change (Wilson 1998: 4), collapsing under pressure from two directions: the influence of inferential theories developed by Paul Grice who showed that communication is possible without the use of a code, on the one hand, and the increasing focus on context dependence, on the other.

As far as Sperber and Wilson were concerned, Grice's originality did not consist in his suggesting that human communication involved the recognition of intentions, but in his stressing the sufficiency of it: "As long as there is some way of recognizing the communicator's intentions, then communication is possible" (1995: 25). In order to exemplify the assertion above, the authors give the following example: If Peter asks Mary "How are you feeling today?", Mary could respond by pulling a bottle of aspirin out of her bag and showing it to him. Communication thus occurs even if there is no coding-decoding process involved. Although the is no convention which interprets the display of a bottle of aspirin as a sign of discomfort or illness, Mary's action points towards her intention of informing Peter that she's not feeling well. In addition to this, Grice emphasized the fact that verbal communication can also involve a "substantial element of inference" (Wilson 1998: 4). The following example given by Deirdre Wilson helps exemplify the idea. Thus, if Peter has to catch a train at 11:00 and the journey to the train station takes 30 minutes, Mary's utterance "It's 10:25." may implicate the idea that *Peter should hurry up and get ready to leave*. People are interpreting other people's language - and expecting other people to interpret their own - all the time, apparently with a surprising degree of accuracy. This happens because words and sentences are used by people in

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certain contexts **to do** something, to communicate. They have certain **functions.** For example, depending on who is speaking to whom and in what context, the following sentence has different functions. "The window is open." could be a) an expression of worry (wife to husband in the middle of the night); b) an order (head teacher to student); c) an interpretation (detective to assistant), and may trigger different responses: 1) "Don't worry, go back to sleep."; 2) [Student going to the window and shutting it]; 3) "By, Jove, Holmes! It was the gardener." In conclusion, **meaning varies with context**; consequently, there are two types of meaning: a **semantic** one (the fixed context-free meaning), or the meaning of the sentence, and a **pragmatic** one (the meaning which the words take on in a particular context, between particular people), or the utterance meaning.

So, the traditional, semiotic approach to communication has been outclassed by the pragmatic approach which managed to demonstrate that the process of interpreting a message by the receiver is more complex than the simple decoding of the linguistic system, involving an entire array of variables. However, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 27) concluded that complex forms of communication combined both modes, i.e. the coding-decoding mode and the inferential one.

Some pragmatic principles

According to Jacob Mey (2001: 71), people engage in communicative activities when they have something to tell each other. This Communicative Principle, as Mey calls it (although it is not mentioned in the pragmatic literature) is conditioned by the speaker's point of view and intention, and the concrete context in which communication occurs, being interpreted by various linguists in different ways.

The first interpretation involves the idea of **cooperation**, which means that "the 'bare facts' of conversation come alive only in a mutually accepted, pragmatically determined context" (May 2001: 71). Paul Grice regarded cooperation as the central element of verbal communication, emphasizing the idea that people's talk exchanges do not normally represent a succession of "disconnected remarks", but a cooperative effort. He formulated this idea into a rule labeled **The Cooperative Principle**, which reads: "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" (Grice 1975: 45).

In order to understand and validate Paul Grice's rationale, one should start from the example given by George Yule (1996: 36) in his book *Pragmatics*.

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According to the scenario he used, there is a woman sitting on a park bench and a large dog lying on the ground in front of the bench. A man comes along and sits down on the bench. The following conversation occurs between the two interlocutors:

Man:	Does your dog bite?
Woman:	No
	(The man reaches down to pet the dog. The dog bites the man's hand)
Man:	Ouch! You said your dog doesn't bite.
Woman:	He doesn't. But that's not my dog.

The problem here resides in the man's assumption that more was communicated than was said. From the man's perspective, the woman's answer provides less information than expected: she might be expected to provide the information stated in the last line (But that's not my dog). The above dialogue demonstrates the idea that people, when talking to each other, expect a certain amount of cooperation from their interlocutors, i.e. as speakers, they try to contribute meaningful, productive utterances to further the conversation, while as listeners, they assume that their conversational partners will do the same. There are four *expectations*[3] people generally hold about their conversational behavior, namely to mention the truth, to say something relevant to the topic under discussion, to be clear and unambiguous and to offer the appropriate amount of information (not too much and not too little). Grice called these expectations **maxims**, and named them in accordance with their main focus: truthfulness – the maxim of Quality, informativeness – the maxim of Quantity, relevance – the maxim of Relation, and clarity – the maxim of Manner. Each maxim comes with a set of rules that, rather than stressing the necessity of being followed, are to be treated as "general statements of principle about how things should be done" (Jones 2012: 67).

The maxims

Quantity	1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange). 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
Quality	Try to make your contribution one that is true. 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

[3] Rodney Jones uses this term in his book, *Discourse Analysis. A resource book for students*, Oxford: Routledge, 2012, pg. 67

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	2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Relation	Be relevant.
Manner	Be perspicuous 1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). 4. Be orderly.

Figure 2. The maxims of cooperation (following Grice, 1975)

These maxims should be treated as unstated assumptions people have in conversations, being not mentioned by the interlocutors in their verbal exchanges. Unless otherwise indicated, the participants are usually adhering to the cooperative principle and its maxims. However, there are also cases in which people intentionally violate or flout the maxims (i.e. they do not always tell the truth, the information provided is sometimes irrelevant, they sometimes say too much or too little, thus altering the meaning they want to transmit, or they formulate the information in an ambiguous manner) in order to create, to generate a special type of meaning called implicature[4]. If A says "I may win the lottery for $83 million." and B's answer is: "There may be people on Mars, too," it is obvious that the maxim of relevance was violated (the initial remark mentioned a potential lottery win, while the second one made reference to life on other planets, having thus no connection with the initiating utterance) in order to suggest the idea that A's possibility to win the lottery is almost inexistent. Another example might be the next one: A's question "How do you like my new suit?" receiving B's answer, "Well, your shoes look nice," thus creating the implicature that A does not really like B's suit. The same maxim of relation is violated in this context, too. B's answers provided in these two examples do not directly express the meaning intended, this being actually implied or suggested. When engaged in conversations, people have certain expectations concerning the reactions of their interlocutors. However, when their expectations are not met, they try to figure out the meaning, starting from the assumption that their conversational partners, rather than being irrational, attempt to imply something indirectly. So, meaning is not always reached through the coding-decoding process, being also a process of interpretation, of inference (the hearer trying to deduce meaning from the available evidence).

[4] Term devised by Grice referring to the implied meaning generated intentionally by the speaker.

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Much of what is said in an interaction is determined by our social relationships. A linguistic interaction is necessarily a social interaction. In order to make sense of what is said in interaction, we have to look at various factors which relate to social distance and closeness. Some of these factors are established prior to the interaction and hence are *external factors* (e.g.: **relative status** of the participants - speakers who see themselves as lower status tend to mark social distance between themselves and the higher status speakers by using address forms that include a title, a last name, but not the first name: "Mr. Adams," "Mrs. Clinton"). Other factors, such as the amount of **imposition** (degree of friendliness), which are often negotiated during an interaction, are *internal factors* to the interaction and can result in the initial social distance changing and being marked as less or more during its course (e.g.: moving from a title-plus-last name to a first-name basis within talk). Both types of factors have an influence not only on what we say, but also on how we interpret it. In many cases, the interpretation goes beyond what is said, and takes on an evaluative meaning. Recognising the impact of such evaluations makes it clear that more is being communicated than is said.

Another principle (or rather, set of principles (Mey 2001: 79)) that takes into account the social relationships (social distance and closeness) of the conversation participants is **Politeness**. Over the last 30 years politeness theories have concentrated on how people employ "communicative strategies to maintain or promote social harmony" (Culpeper 2011: 2). From this point of view, politeness is defined as a "means of minimising confrontation in discourse - both the possibility of confrontation occurring at all, and the possibility that a confrontation will be perceived as threatening" (Lakoff 1989:102), its main role being to "maintain the social equilibrium and friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being co-operative in the first place" (Leech 1983:82). Brown and Levinson's point of view focuses on the same aspect, relating it to formal diplomatic protocol, thus reaching the conclusion that politeness "presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties" (1987: 1).

Two theorists, Robin Lakoff (1973) and Geoffrey Leech (1983), have attempted to describe politeness in terms of general principles or maxims which people assume are being followed in the utterances of others. As with the co-operative principle, any flouting of these maxims will take on meaning: (1) *Don't Impose*, (2) *Give Options*, and (3) *Make your receiver feel good*. These maxims of the politeness principle explain many of those frequent utterances in which no new information is communicated. People often give orders and make requests and pleas (directives) in the form of

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elaborate questions (*Would you mind..., Could you possibly..., May I ask you to*…) which give the option of refusal; apologise for imposing (*I'm sorry to bother you.*); add in praise to make the hearer feel good (*You know much more about this subject than I do.*). Leech comes with a much more developed maxim-based approach to politeness, suggesting, at the same time, that these principles of politeness may be weighted differently in different cultures. Thus, his Politeness Principle consists of the following maxims:

1. TACT MAXIM:
a. Minimise cost to other [b. Maximise benefit to other]
2. GENEROSITY MAXIM:
a. Minimise benefit to self [b. Maximise cost to self]
3. APPROBATION MAXIM:
a. Minimise dispraise of others [b. Maximise praise of others]
4. MODESTY MAXIM:
a. Minimise praise of self [b. Maximise dispraise of self]
5. AGREEMENT MAXIM:
a. Minimise disagreement between self and other [b Maximise agreement between self and other]
6. SYMPATHY MAXIM:
a. Minimise antipathy between self and other [b. Maximise sympathy between self and other]

(Leech 1983: 132)

Brown and Levinson's work (1987) in studies of politeness in different cultures suggests that in order to enter into social relationships we must acknowledge the *face* of other people. But what exactly is *face*? What does it make reference to? The concept of *face*, as far as the two authors are concerned, is related to notions such as reputation, prestige, and self-esteem.

> Our notion of 'face' is derived from that of Goffman … and from the English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'. Thus face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

In their book *International communication: a discourse approach*, Ron Scollon, Suzanne Wong Scollon and Rodney H. Jones define *face* as "the negotiated public image mutually granted to each other by participants in a

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communicative event" (qtd in Jones 2012: 24). According to their point of view, this definition manages to focus on three aspects that are of paramount importance when analysing *face*. The first element is the "public image" which clearly suggests the fact that one's true self may be different from the projection one chooses to offer to the outside world. The second essential element refers to the word "negotiated" which attempts to demonstrate that the image is constructed in relation to the person or people one is interacting with, thus being subjected to "multiple adjustments" (Jones 2012: 24). The last element of the puzzle is the "mutually granted" component which implies that cooperation is essential, face being that "aspect of our identity which defines us in relation to others" (Jones 2012: 24).

Talk may be a face-threatening act (FTA) which may damage *negative face* (wanting to be free from imposition) and *positive face* (wanting to be liked). If one is criticising someone else, he or she is expressing disapproval, which threatens the interlocutor's positive face (his/her desire to be liked or desire for approval). If somebody tells someone else what to do, it might threaten their negative face (their desire to be free). In all kinds of talk people have to decide between getting a message across directly, which might challenge someone, and speaking indirectly, which is more polite but risks losing the message. Politeness, thus, tries to encompass all the means and strategies employed to show awareness of another person's *face*. In this respect, ***positive politeness*** refers to a face-saving act which is concerned with the person's positive face and which tends to show solidarity. As a speaker, one must show interest in the hearer, claim common ground with him, seek agreement and give sympathy. ***Negative politeness***, on the other hand, refers to a face-saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face and which will tend to show deference and apology for the imposition or interruption. Consequently, one must be conventionally indirect, minimise imposition on the hearer, ask for forgiveness and give deference (Brown and Levinson 1987: 102,131). So, an interaction with other people should always take into account the communicators' need to be liked and respected, the process being a twofold one: protecting personal needs as well as attending to others' needs and desires.

One cannot tackle the issue of communication without making reference to another aspect of huge importance, i.e. **Speech Acts**. The way in which speakers use language to carry out various intended actions and the ability of the hearers or addressees to grasp the intended meaning from what has been said is actually what speech act theory deals with. John Austin (1962: 1) was the first to offer some insights into this new theory of linguistic communication, the philosopher claiming that:

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> It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely. (…) But now in recent years, many things, which would once have been accepted without question as 'statements' by both philosophers and grammarians have been scrutinized with new care. (…) It has come to be commonly held that many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straight forward information about the facts (…).

The point he tried to make, along with other philosophers and linguists, such as Paul Grice (1957) or John Searle (1965, 1969, 1975) was that the "minimal units of human communication" which he called speech acts represented more than simple "linguistic expressions"; their overall sense went beyond their simple semantic meaning, they actually pointing towards the "performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving directions, apologizing, thanking, and so on" (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989: 2). The important thing about those utterances that performed actions, Austin continued, was not so much their meaning, as their force (1962: 100), their ability to do something. According to the philosopher's theory, all speech acts have three kinds of force: a locutionary force, or the force of what the words actually mean, an illocutionary force, or the force of the action the words are intended to perform, and a perlocutionary force, or the force of the actual effect of the words on listeners.

One of the problems, however, with analysing speech acts is that in the process of "assigning functions to sentences" the apparent sentence meaning may not coincide with the speaker's pragmatic intention (Cohen 1996: 384), i.e. speakers sometimes express speech acts indirectly. In other words, the locutionary force of their speech act (the meaning of the words) might be very different from the illocutionary force (what they intend to do with their words). For instance, the simple utterance "*It's hot in here*" could be an indirect request for someone to open the window, an indirect refusal to close the window because someone is cold, or a complaint implying that someone should know better than to keep the windows closed (expressed emphatically).

Based on Austin's and Searle's theory, George Yule (1996: 53-54) identifies five categories of speech acts based on the functions assigned to them: declarations (or speech acts that change the world via their utterance),

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representatives (or speech acts through which the speaker makes words fit the world (of belief)), expressives (or speech acts that state what the speaker feels (psychological states), directives (or speech acts that speakers use to get someone else do something; they express what the speaker wants) and commissives (or speech acts that the speakers use to commit themselves to some future action; they express what the speaker intends).

There is also another possibility to distinguish different types of speech acts, and this can be achieved on the basis of structure (Yule 1996: 54). This approach is provided by the three basic sentence types in English (declarative, interrogative and imperative) which relate to the three generally established communicative functions (statement, question, command/request). Under such circumstances, a direct speech act would be the one in which the sentence type matches its ascribed function, whereas an indirect speech act would be the one in which there is no correspondence between structure and function. Indirectness may (depending on its form) express avoidance of a confrontational speech act or avoidance of the semantic content of the utterance itself. It enables speakers to avoid committing themselves and retreat in front of danger. One of the most common types of indirect speech acts in English has the form of interrogative, which is not typically used to ask a question (we don't expect only an answer, we expect an action): for example, "Could you pass the salt?" or "Would you open this?". According to Robin Lakoff, the form of an utterance can definitely reflect the intention of the speaker to communicate indirectly.

> Indirectness may (depending on its form) express avoidance of a confrontational speech act (say, an imperative like 'Go home!') in favor of a less intrusive form like a question ('Why don't you go home?'); or avoidance of the semantic content of the utterance itself ('Go home!' being replaced by an imperative that makes its point more circumspectly, like 'Be sure and close the door behind you when you leave'; or both ('Why don't you take these flowers to your mother on your way home?') (Lakoff 2012: 137).

Peter Grundy (2008: 90) states the same thing, i.e. speech acts "challenge" the idea that there is a "one-to-one correspondence" between a form and its function. As far as he is concerned, it is impossible to claim that interrogative or declarative sentences have unique predictable functions. As a consequence, inferring the function of what is said by considering its form and context is an ability which is essential for the creation and reception of coherent discourse, and thus for successful communication.

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The conclusion one can get is that communication involves interpretation of what other people mean and what they are trying to do when they express their own ideas and opinions and an accurate assessment involves more variables, such as the relative distance between the interlocutors, the context in which the exchange takes place, the decoding or inferring abilities of the interlocutor and the real intention of the utterer.

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