Language and communication

• What is language?
• How do we communicate?
• Pragmatic principles
• Common ground

What is language

• Language is the most complex form of communication used by any animal
• Allows the transmission of culture
  – Permits us to teach others
  – The ratchet effect (Tomasello)
    • Each generation more sophisticated than the last

The components of language

• Speech sounds
• Written symbols
• Words
• Syntax
  – Permits language to be productive
• Communication strategies
• All have been a topic of study
Communication

• Why start with communication?
  – Understanding why we would study the rest of the components of language does not make sense without understanding communication.

• Prototypical type of conversation
  – Two people
  – Face-to-face
  – Speaking

• Many communication situations differ, though
  – Phone calls, lectures, books
  – Communication can go astray in these situations.

What is a conversation like?

• A: Well, let’s see, we have on the bags Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third.
• C: That’s what I want to find out
• A: I say, Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third.
• C: Are you the manager?
• A: Yes.
• C: Are you going to be the coach too?
• A: Yes.
• C: And you don’t know the fellows’ names?
• A: Well, I should.
• C: Well then, who’s on first?
• A: Who.

This appears to follow rules

• Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson
• People take turns speaking
• When one person speaks, everyone waits for the other person to finish.
• The speaker may suggest the next speaker
• If there is a break, someone may jump in
  – The first person to speak gets to continue
  – If two people start at the same time, one will stop.
This misses a lot

- These rules are a set of actions a person takes
- Communication is more of a joint action
  - Dancing and shaking hands are joint actions
- Both the speaker and listener are active participants
  - Rapid corrections are made
  - Lots of back-channel feedback
  - Conventions are established

Speakers and overhearers

- Schober and Clark
  - Examining communication as a joint action
- Pair of people play a communication game
  - Must get a set of figures in the same order
- Tape of interaction then played to another person
  - Must also get the figures into the proper order
  - Overhearer less accurate than participant
- Why?
  - Participant can get immediate corrections
  - Use of backchannel feedback (e.g., uh-huh)
Principles of communication

• We often do not speak in complete sentences
• We rarely say what we mean literally
  – Previous cartoon is an example
• How do people interpret what is said?
  – A set of social conventions
  – Determines how utterances are structured
• Given-new convention

Conversational Maxims

• Grice
• Quantity: Be informative
• Quality: Tell the truth
• Relation: Be relevant
• Manner: Be clear
• A “normal” utterance satisfies these maxims
Violations of the maxims

• Quantity
  – Do you have a watch?
  – Interpreted as a request for the time.
  – Do you accept credit cards?
  – Interpreted as a request for the types of cards taken.
• Quality
  – I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse
  – Interpreted as an exaggeration of hunger

More violations

• Relevance
  – A: Do you have a watch?
  – B: Yes.
  – Interpreted as (a weak attempt) at humor, or perhaps annoyance.
• Manner
  – Use of jargon in social settings
  – Interpreted as an attempt to exclude

Indirect speech acts

• We use these violations to communicate
• Why don’t we just say what we mean?
  – Direct speech may sometimes be rude.
• Ironic and sarcastic statements
  – John, that was a really intelligent answer.
  – Less rude than, “John, that was stupid.”
Summary

• Language is used to communicate
• Communication is a joint action
• We often communicate non-literally
• Next classes
  – What are the basic components of language
  – What enables us to talk about so many topics