

Teaching pragmatics

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1 Controlling the discourse

In the fall of 2003, Lyn Frazier suggested that she and I co-teach an undergraduate course on pragmatics and human discourse processing, and I leapt at the opportunity. We soon began designing the syllabus and preparing materials, with the help of then-graduate students Helen Majewski and Florian Schwarz. Our goal was a curriculum that would satisfy the UMass Amherst interdisciplinary general education requirement by emphasizing psychological methods for understanding language, drawing also on ideas from philosophy and computer science. Other departments on campus were pulling in scores of students with flashy interdisciplinary titles. Needless to say, we thought Linguistics could play that game well.

We wanted the course to be free of prerequisites, so the title “Pragmatics and Discourse Processing” was going to miss its intended audience. “The Linguistics of Discourse Structuring” and its variants were too drab. “The Flow of Information” was too generic, but its variant “The Control of Information” introduced a sense of agency and action. Riffing on “Control”, we ended up with “Controlling the Discourse”, which stuck, and which quickly had an impact on how we conceived of the course. The phrase “Controlling the Discourse” is underspecified about who is in control, and it leaves open just what kind of discourse this might be. I find it vaguely ominous, suggesting high-stakes talk exchanges — courtroom dramas, interrogations, political debate. The title shaped our short catalog description, which carved out a lasting path for us:

The question “Why did you commit the murder?” is likely to be met with a sustained objection if asked in a courtroom. Why? “Who on earth would listen to polka?” sounds more like an assertion than a question. Why? Under what circumstances do speakers choose “Bagels, I like” over “I like bagels”? These are questions about how speakers use language to structure and control discourses. We’ll look to current linguistic theory to find answers to them. Students will pick up skills that are vital to understanding how to structure effective arguments. They will discover why information structure can be a matter of life or death (politically, socially, literally). Intuitional, corpus, and experimental data will be used to examine issues in pragmatics and discourse processing.

Trained eyes can probably make out the beginnings of a syllabus in this: presuppositions, speech acts, implicatures, information structuring. The fuller description gestured at ellipsis, anaphora, and intonational meaning. Thus, the course was founded in the tried-and-true subject matter of pragmatics textbooks. Our basic conceit was to address each topic from both theoretical and experimental perspectives. Roughly speaking, I would set up a basic theoretical framework, and Lyn would assess the degree to which it was known to be wrong (right) using psycholinguistic evidence. Students would get a feel for the rhythm of hypothesis formulation, testing, and reformulation, while also gaining some conscious awareness of the pragmatic calculations we all perform when interacting with other intentional agents.

More unusually, I think, the description emphasizes what students will learn to *do*, rather than what knowledge they will acquire. It highlights the ways in which they will be asked to apply the course's ideas to problems they confront outside of linguistics. We had even more of this in mind for the course itself: a hands-on introduction to running psycholinguistic experiments, live debates drawing material from landmark court cases, and assignments that asked students to sniff out their own interesting instances of pragmatic enrichment. Finally, taking a stab at a meta-application of the course's content, we aimed to get students to apply their knowledge of pragmatics to their own papers and those of their classmates.

Developing and teaching *Controlling the Discourse* with Lyn profoundly affected my views of pragmatics. It opened my eyes to the many ways in which the lessons of pragmatic theory can be usefully applied to real world situations, and it led me to a better understanding of the special challenges that surround generalizations and theoretical constructs in this area. The present essay tells the story of some of these personal and pedagogical discoveries.

2 Getting started

The first opening for *Controlling the Discourse* on the UMass Amherst schedule was Spring, 2005. As it happened, I first taught the course in the summer of 2004 as a solo-effort, at the New York Institute for Cognitive and Cultural Studies, at St. Petersburg State University in St. Petersburg, Russia. That version had just a two-week, six-meeting run, so it was a sort of pilot study for the semester-long class we would teach in the next academic year. My Petersburg version emphasized information structuring: passivization, scrambling, referential expressions. This made it easy to draw lots of examples from Russian morphosyntax. (It also helped avoid overlap with the introduction to pragmatics that I was teaching there simultaneously.) The emphasis on information structuring carried over to the first time Lyn and I taught the course together, in a fifteen-week format, but we eased up somewhat on that aspect of things in later years, largely because it ended up depending so much on the analysis of sentence structure, which most of our students were unfamiliar with.

By the Spring, 2009, semester, after two previous co-taught versions and one solo effort by me (Fall, 2007), the syllabus had evolved to have the following basic structure:

0. Overview; introductions to pragmatics and psycholinguistics
1. Gricean pragmatics
2. Information structuring
3. Presupposition and anaphora
4. Ellipsis and discourse coherence
5. Intonation
6. Framing

Students wrote short papers connected with each of these topics, and they did at least one experimental study of their own, usually a small questionnaire-based pilot at about unit 4 in the course flow. Some students also did a second study, elaborating on their first or starting from scratch, for the final project. At one time, the course finished with a week on 'Applied pragmatics', where we made connections between language and the law, language and the media, and so forth. This worked well, but we soon realized that the applied part could be woven into the fabric of the course itself. We simply needed to call on real examples when articulating

concepts and motivating theoretical proposals. We did, though, successfully stage some courtroom-like debates at the semester's end, which emphasized the potential for applied aspects to the material.

As I said, the course had no prerequisites, and we succeeded in our attempts to draw in students from other departments with our catchy title and description. I still have the opening-day surveys for the Fall, 2007, and Spring, 2009, courses. Of the 53 students who took these surveys, 25 had never taken a linguistics course, and 8 had taken just one. There were 25 distinct majors represented, from all over campus. Conversely, the course attracted many linguistics majors; 10 of these 53 students had taken at least 4 linguistics courses before, and 13 of them had declared a linguistics major or minor. Groups with widely spread experience levels are always challenging; some could define a lot of the terms in our topics list, whereas others probably saw only a baffling hodgepodge of Greek, computer science, and architectural terms. Students who finish day 1 feeling bored or overwhelmed are unlikely to return; having hooked them with our flashy title and active description, we needed to keep them.

Our opening surveys also asked "What is your understanding of the course's title 'Controlling the Discourse'? (What do *you* think falls under this heading?)" and followed up with "Provide an example of someone or something attempting to *control the discourse* in the sense that you understand that phrase". The answers we got indicate that our students arrived with the right mindset. A lot of the answers were like this one: "'Controlling the discourse' to me refers to the different ways in which things are said to omit, tweak, or deliberately mislead people about the truth". Students' examples mentioned devious politicians, job interviewers and interviewees, diplomatic situations, and the media, as well as things we had not thought of but that fit squarely under our rubric: code-switching as a conversational tactic, the power of dictionary makers, self-directed pep talks.

Thus, in general, the students were receptive to units 1-6 on the syllabus, whether they knew it or not, and we just had to capitalize on this. The overview and introductory lectures listed in unit 0 totaled about two and a half hours of class time, with the overview occupying the whole first meeting. Even before we started going through requirements, office hours, and other syllabus details, we distributed a handout that consisted of just the headings in 1-6, a few sentences of explanation, and lots of live examples. For each example, the question was the same: "What's going on here?"

For example, under a subheading "The power of false presuppositions" we had the spam email subject-line "Are you still looking for a job?" Drawing on student comments, we would assemble on the board: general information about the context of email and the way spammers take advantage of it; the linguistic details of the examples — in technical terms, the indexical *you*, the particle *still*, the resulting bias; and variants of the example that would be pushy to a greater or lesser degree. Punchline: notice the power of presuppositions, and the ways in which these spammers leverage our natural impulses to be charitable when interpreting others. (Instructors are warned that, if the discussion is going well, this particular example will probably lead at least one student to suggest the similar spam subject-line "Why be an average guy any longer?", which raises many of the same issues and which might or might not feel safe for your classroom.)

In Spring, 2009, we were in luck when it came to ellipsis examples. Newly elected U.S. president Barack Obama had made "Yes, we can" a campaign slogan. What is special about this example? Experienced linguistics students home in quickly on the site of the missing verb phrase; the non-linguists in the room need to be reassured that the terminology will come clear in

a couple of months. What's important for now, we would say, is that *something is missing*. Why didn't the Obama campaign flesh out the missing part? How might it have worked to their advantage to leave the phrase underspecified?

And so on like this. What is unusual about the title "There is no God and Dawkins is his prophet"? How is "You're a Communist." different from "You're a Communist?" and "Are you a Communist?" When, if ever, could you say, "Bagels, I like" without being accused of sounding like Yoda? What exactly is right-wing political operative Frank Luntz doing to us when he brands political issues, and why might we react strongly to his efforts? How do his techniques compare with those of the political left? Humanities disciplines have a useful word for this: "problematizing". Our goal was just to make students aware that there is something noteworthy going on in all these seemingly mundane cases. In drawing exclusively on examples from the media, politics, and their own experiences, we were trying to show them that the issues have immediate relevance to life outside the classroom. Now the rest of the course could be devoted to showing them how developing explicit hypotheses would make them savvier producers and consumers of utterances.

3 Selective viewing

In the linguistics classroom, we often teach specialized forms of selective viewing. In syntax, students must learn to see morphosyntactic structure, and only morphosyntactic structure, though the confusion of meaning, register, and style that attaches to every example we give them. In phonology, they must grow adept at hearing only the sound patterns, whereas semantics requires them to look past the details of sound and structure to the underlying conventional content, all the while setting aside, as much as possible, the obvious fact that meaning arises from human interactions as well as lexical ones. Typically, if the lectures are interactive, beginning students spend a great deal of time probing your examples and offering new ones in an effort to acquire something like the same fuzzy sense you have for where these fuzzy boundaries between subfields lie.

All inquiry demands this sort of selective viewing, and students who can't or won't engage in it tend to do poorly. We should acknowledge, though, that it is remote from people's everyday experiences with language. Part of the magic of language processing is that we so rapidly and accurately apprehend and assimilate a wide range of diverse information coming at us via a number of different streams. Thus, reluctance to focus on any one aspect of linguistic communication is sometimes a reluctance to sell the whole phenomenon short. We should remain aware also of the fact that perceptive students might find the boundaries we've erected artificial. Students who refuse to distinguish phonology from phonetics, morphology from phonology, syntax from semantics, are in good company among our professional ranks.

Pragmatics is interestingly different in this regard. Pragmatics encourages us, and our students, to embrace the full complexity of our examples, to take them roughly as discourse participants would take them in context, and to work with them in their full richness — attentive to all information that might be lurking in the signal, inclusive of form, intonation, gesture, the background of the speaker, the speaker's assumptions about his audience, the audience's assumptions about the speaker, their respective socio-cultural backgrounds, and on and on. This makes teaching pragmatics a real pleasure. One can let students loose, encouraging them to gather evidence as they see fit, without having to nudge them back into the problem space.

This is what we did on day one of Controlling the Discourse. We just let them loose on the examples, open to the idea that any and all information might be relevant to our understanding of the examples. This comes with its own dangers, of course. Students can get lost in the complexity of specific examples, unable to generalize to new cases. Sometimes the example has special emotional resonance for them, sometimes they've just invested a lot of time in it, and sometimes they lose sight of the fact that they won't make progress without some idealization and generalization. So, though the empirical domain is wide open, teaching pragmatics is still teaching a kind of selective viewing — pushing students to see the underlying structure of the examples and helping them identify those patterns in new cases. Thus, we return to the paradigm of selective viewing, as students learn to see past irrelevant distractors to the core of the underlying strategies for production and comprehension.

Controlling the Discourse was a constant battle for control over this point. Having gotten a taste for wild exploration on the first day, the students were often inclined to continue in that mode. So we had to push back, to get them to find abstractions in the data. To give one example, the following darkly comic example from Lawrence M. Solan and Peter M. Tiersma's wonderful book *Speaking of Crime: The Language of Criminal Justice* (2005, University of Chicago Press) is always a hit:

- (1) John and Mary have recently started going together. Valentino is Mary's ex-boyfriend. One evening John asks Mary, "Have you seen Valentino this week?" Mary answers, "Valentino's been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks." Valentino has in fact been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks, but it is also the case that Mary had a date with Valentino the night before. Did Mary lie?

Suppose you want students to focus on the nature of Mary's assertive response to John's polar interrogative, connecting this with Grice's maxims of relevance, quantity, and quality, as well as the basic pragmatics of posing and addressing questions. There is so much in the example beyond this that one can sympathize with students who would prefer to take it as its own unique creature. Reveling in the complexity of the situation won't deepen our understanding of it, though. We must push for abstractions.

To this end, examples like (1) can be presented alongside similar cases like (2) and (3) (which are also from *Speaking of Crime*), with the challenge being to find what threads run through all three.

- (2) Speakers A and B have the following conversation:
 A: I lost a twenty dollar bill — do you know where it is?
 B: I saw it on the floor somewhere.
 Speaker A later discovers that B picked up A's \$20 from the floor and had it in his pocket at the time of this conversation.
- (3) *Bronston v. United States*, decided by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1973. Bronston's company had petitioned for bankruptcy.
 Q: Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr. Bronston?
 A: No, sir.
 Q: Have you ever?
 A: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

The truth: Bronston also had a Swiss bank account in the past.

To meaningfully group these cases, one must set aside the dark comedy of kissing diseases that (1) makes salient, along with the contextually-variable worth of \$20, all questions about who is or isn't friends with whom, whether Bronston was a good business man or a bad one, whether the lawyer was competent, etc., and focus instead on how the person giving the response is exploiting basic pragmatic principles to deceive his audience. Crucially, one isn't saying that this other information isn't relevant to our pragmatic inferences, but rather that we need to move to a higher level of abstraction in order to identify new cases of deceptive pragmatics when they arrive on the lips of politicians and pundits.

4 Pragmatic hypotheses

In pragmatics, absolutes are rare. Linguists often worry about the ways in which judgments become fuzzy in phonology and syntax, but this is nothing compared to the seemingly hopeless muddle of intuitions people have about discourse well-formedness and speaker intentions. What's more, violating core generalizations of the theory tends not to result in a feeling of ill-formedness or incoherence, but rather a feeling that, well, something interesting has occurred. I try to accept this and use it to my advantage. I like, for example, to drive my students crazy the first time they ask (4) by replying with (a), (b), or (c).

- (4) When is our next quiz?
- a. It's supposed to rain on Friday.
 - b. Are we in earthquake country?
 - c. Consider the lobster!

After the confused looks have rippled across the classroom, I jot my answer onto the chalkboard and then ask students what they think it means. A diverse cloud of extra, largely unjustified assumptions forms. Accepting any of them would turn my answer into one that partially resolved the original question, but, without such contextual support, I can and should be accused of violating the maxim of relevance. I then pose two questions: what compels us to work overtime to get (4) to cohere, and what is the nature of that coherence?

From here, we can start to probe slightly different examples involving different background assumptions. Suppose it is known that the person being addressed is uncooperative, as in (5) (from the TV show *Monk*), in which Stottlemeyer seeks to dodge the direct question by supplying true but partly irrelevant information, in an effort to avoid giving the commission a good reason to keep Monk off of the police force.

- (5) Commission member: Is Mr. Monk ready to be put back on the force?
 Stottlemeyer: Mr. Monk has *excellent* instincts.
 Commission member: Yes, but is he ready to be reinstated?
 Stottlemeyer: He is an *excellent* investigator.
 Commission member: Captain, please...

Alternatively, suppose the person being addressed is cooperative but is known to have only partial information about how to resolve the issue. How do these scenarios differ from situations

in which people seek to explicitly “opt out” of cooperative behavior, with remarks like “No comment”? What information is conveyed by such utterances? And so forth. If I am lucky, it has now been so long since the tedious question (4) was posed that I don’t have to answer it. Instead, we have achieved a deeper appreciation of the lengths to which people will go in order to bring others’ verbal behavior in line with the principles of cooperativeness.

Information-structuring principles follow a similar pattern, but here the situation is even trickier, since the basic grammaticality of specific clauses often does seem to be at stake. If one says, “old information goes to the front” or “people won’t use a proper name where a pronoun will do” in front of a roomful of engaged undergraduates, they are sure to object. The trick is to shift the debate slightly. Get specific examples from them, and then study this new data set as a group, attempting to find ways in which it supports the original generalization. Do the new examples reveal that the speaker has an unusual perspective on the discourse? Or is the speaker deliberately trying to run up against your expectations, which are shaped by these principles?

I was slow to appreciate how challenging this situation is for students. Experienced researchers in linguistics are adept at holding specific assumptions constant and watching to see what happens when the variables under investigation change their values. If a journal article asserts that the combination of (4) and any of (a)-(c) results in incoherence, we know that this is a qualified sort of incoherence, one that implicitly restricts attention to contexts in which no special assumptions have crept in to save the dialogue. We deliberately suspend our normal charitable assumptions about cooperative agents in order to better understand why and how this discourse has gone off track. Our students might be unprepared to do this. That’s what the cloud of special assumptions reveals. It is one of the deeply impressive things about how humans communicate, but it can get in the way of understanding what makes discourses like those in (4) pragmatically unusual.

These concerns are not unique to teaching pragmatics. In syntax, for instance, strings are marked as ill-formed only under specific assumptions about their internal structure, and students often have a hard time holding those assumptions constant. Similarly, semantic judgments are often about specific combinations of structure and compositional interpretation, both of which might be hard for students to keep a mental grip on. The problems are particularly acute in pragmatics, though, because the number of relevant factors is awesomely huge and even the “ill-formed” cases often turn out to have some discourse utility.

Experimental data are invaluable for overcoming these conceptual hurdles. They force students to back off from their particular reactions to the particular examples under discussion, looking instead at a general pattern of responses. In *Controlling the Discourse*, Lyn presented most of the experimental studies, and it was always enlightening to watch her linger over an experimenter’s background assumptions and their connections to the design, emphasizing how all of it connected (or failed to connect) with the theoretical ideas on the table. Not only did this help students grow accustomed to the abstractions discussed in section 3 above, but it also helped them sort out their own conflicting intuitions about felicity and discourse coherence, by highlighting the importance of keeping particular background assumptions fixed when probing their examples.

The students might have gained a sense for pragmatic inquiry by watching us develop and test others’ hypotheses, but I think it wasn’t until they had tried it out themselves that they truly appreciated the delicate nature of psycholinguistic work. Nothing drives home the importance of having a uniform set of examples and keeping tight control over the points of variation like a chaotic set of responses to one’s own experimental stimuli.

In general, the most successful experimental projects in Controlling the Discourse involved ellipsis or anaphora, which is why, in our own act of controlling the discourse, we introduced these topics alongside the basic mechanics of running a pilot questionnaire study. Ellipsis and anaphora are ideal for first pragmatics experiments because they involve all the complexity of discourse, but they provide plenty of room for constructing controlled experimental items in which it is easy to identify the variables. There is still plenty of room for methodological innovation. Our students did forced-choice grammaticality tasks, graded acceptability tasks, and fill-in-the-blank tasks, all aimed at getting at preferred interpretations and exploring the contours of these phenomena. Most used textual examples, but we saw successful experiments involving pictures, recordings, and a full full-scale performances.

Ellipsis and anaphora hide a major challenge, though, for non-linguists. The following block of examples will look highly varied to specialists in ellipsis, but the budding young pragmaticist is likely to see a lot of basically identical cases:

- (6) Edna passed the test,
- a. and Sam did too.
 - b. as did Sam.
 - c. and Sam too.
 - d. and Sam did that too.
 - e. and Said did it too.
 - f. and Sam did so too.
 - g. which Sam can too.

Consider the student who runs a questionnaire-based study probing the extent to which the antecedent for the ellipsis case can be far from the ellipsis site in the discourse. The answer will be “Very far” for (a) and (d)-(f), but “No far at all” for the others in this list. This student will *henceforth* appreciate the difference between these phenomena, but the experiment itself might have crashed, leaving the student distraught. So it is important to implement multiple checks on the materials. We had students workshop each other’s examples, and we checked them carefully ourselves before anyone ran any subjects, correcting examples in various ways in order to better align materials and hypotheses. This kind of checking is crucial for any student experimental study, but the wide-open nature of pragmatic inquiry makes it all the more important. Student experimenters are unlikely to be sensitive to distinctions like those in (6), but, per the miracle of human language processing, their subjects probably will be.

5 Assignments

Our first assignment, generally distributed on the opening day, broke down into four parts and helped to establish the rhythm of our work schedule. Here’s the first and most important part:

Find an utterance that seems to be just the merest sketch of what the speaker actually intended with it. Intuitively, this will be a situation in which the speaker seems to “mean more than she says”. Your utterance can come from anywhere: it can be something you overhear, something you read, something you encounter in the media, and so forth. It need not be an utterance in the traditional sense: signs, texts, rules and regulations — any language-based medium is a potential source of data.

At this point, they had heard the name Grice, but not much more than that, and if they had heard “implicature” from us at all, it was probably a terminological slip on our part, a violation of our temporary ban on technical terms. All we had done in class was explore examples. This assignment was meant as a transition to meatier theoretical ideas, but we wanted them to continue exploring without being weighted down in that way. The above was followed by a note called “Context is crucial”, which emphasized that they needed to provide a full picture of the context of utterance along with their example. “Part of the lesson here,” we said, “is that utterances in isolation are almost meaningless. It’s only once they are situated in context that we can see what they really mean.”

Personally, I am wary of defining pragmatics as “the theory of language use” or as “the theory of the relation between language and language users”. These phrases, though arguably accurate, convey very little about what there is to theorize about. In *Presumptive Meanings* (2000, MIT Press), Stephen C. Levinson comes closer to encapsulating the nature of pragmatic inquiry. He first observes that the phrases we utter are just a “sketch” of what we actually convey when we use language with each other, and then he characterizes pragmatics as the study of the ways in which people systematically flesh out these sketches into full-fledged meanings. One can hear the echos of this more specialized definition in the above introduction to assignment 1, which, in conjunction with our own illustrative examples, did reliably steer students to core problems of pragmatic theory. In response to it, we received examples involving implicit quantifier domain restrictions, scalar implicatures, metaphor, jokes, and implicit speech-acts (as well as, admittedly, more unusual things that didn’t work at all — e.g., the pragmatics of meeting yourself while time-traveling, absurdly intricate passages from philosophy texts, children arguing with their parents).

Step 2 of the assignment was to write a description of the example with commentary about what they thought was happening in it. Step 3 was an in-class workshop of these descriptions. Before this workshop, we devoted a class period to the basic tenets of Gricean pragmatics: the cooperative principle, the maxims and their interactions, and a lot more illustrative examples. The immediate focus of the lecture, and the organizing principle of the workshop, was to address the following open question about their examples:

Is Grice relevant? If the maxims seems not to be relevant to your example, that’s important too, because it means that Grice’s theory might not be as comprehensive as we would hope. In this case, explain why Gricean pragmatics doesn’t suffice for your example.

Students love the sense that they might uncover a gap in the theoretical coverage, so they can be zealous about saying “No”, but generally the effect is good, and this kind of question engenders lively group discussion. That discussion fed into step 4, the final draft, which extended the (perhaps modified) description of the example with “the Gricean connections (or lack thereof)” that emerged from the group discussion.

This sounds complicated, but we were with students every step of the way, and the overall effect was worth the students’ constant questions about what they were supposed to do next. With this assignment, we established that the course’s papers would not be one-off affairs, but rather layered, multi-step processes resembling the progression of a research project. (This is

pretty heavy-duty for a general-education course. Our deal with the students was that we would devote large chunks of class time to writing, editing, and revising in small groups.)

Over the course of fifteen weeks, the students did four or five more assignments like this, in addition to weekly quizzes and other small assignments. In the information-structuring unit, we controlled the empirical basis a lot more, but then we opened it back up again for presuppositions and the later units, which tolerate a lot more variation in the nature of the examples.

Not all the group work that students did was connected directly with their assignments. We often used that forum to further develop course material and to explore new kinds of examples. There are always students who dislike group work, no matter what it's design, but the majority opinion of our use of it was positive. In the Fall, 2007, a mid-semester course evaluation by the UMass Amherst Center for Teaching revealed that students wanted more of it. They characterized it as "very helpful" and "clarifying", especially in that it gave them the chance to get "ideas of what other students are doing/thinking" and, in a playfully meta-move, they passed on the comment that they benefitted from holding "discourses on discourse".

6 Meta-applications

Our short course description says, "Students will pick up skills that are vital to understanding how to structure effective arguments." We had in mind that students would begin to apply the lessons of the class to their own writing. For instance, by the end of unit 2 on the syllabus, students knew a lot about the discourse conditions that favor preposing over postposing in English-like languages, and this in turn governs passivization, topicalization, dislocation, and other constructions that vary how information is structured. This could be applied, at the sentence-level, to crafting essays. Similarly, our in-depth look at the techniques of framing in the political realm provided a lot of information about what works and what doesn't work when it comes to persuading people of a particular position. This too could be used on the very assignments that we handed out.

A few students entered the course with the expectation that we would be helping them at this practical level. For example, responding to the question about what the course title meant to them, one student wrote, on day 1, "I took it to mean that this course would elevate my ability to clearly and concisely express any point I was trying to get across to any given audience", and a few others mention things that sound vaguely prescriptive (e.g., the title as a gentler version of 'Talking Better'). A few hoped we could make them better con artists.

In practice, I think we did not see much evidence that students were applying the ideas of the class to their writing for the class. This is initially puzzling; we do have plenty of evidence that they understood the material. They even designed original experiments to probe sophisticated hypotheses inspired by the course material. So we were definitely getting through to them at an analytic level. We did not, though, see a real change in, for example, the artfulness with which students mapped out their basic ideas, nor did we find evidence of increased attention to the phrases they used to describe things in their assignments.

Perhaps it was just too meta, to inward looking. Most students were simultaneously getting an introduction to the ins and outs of linguistic theorizing as they tried to get a look at the outlines of pragmatic theory and the basic techniques of psycholinguistic experimentation. Implicitly asking them to apply those ideas right away might have been too much. In contrast, when we *explicitly* asked them to apply the ideas in their writing, they generally succeeded. For

example, one lively in-class group work involved writing short advertisement-like descriptions for obviously faulty product and ideas: televisions with no volume control, shopping mall designs that would destroy their quaint New England town, real estate on frat row, and so forth. Here, they wielded their new expertise at presupposition, implicature, and information structuring to quite good (or ill) effect. But when it came to the analytic essays for the course itself, they seemed to slip back into writing in their usual mode — at least as far as I could tell; I should add that the students generally did very well, which might mean that they were manipulating us rhetorically in ways too subtle for us to detect consciously.

7 What teaching pragmatics can teach us about the rest of linguistics

It's a common complaint among university instructors that students have become too career-oriented, that they don't appreciate the intrinsic value of a broad liberal arts education. I am sympathetic with this complaint, but I think the student perspective is less about paychecks than it might seem. In my experience, students are concerned about what we will teach them to *do* — what skills they will acquire and what those skills will empower them to accomplish. They are quite sensibly thinking past their short college years to the much longer time that they will spend out in the professional world, where having a whole lot of knowledge is of little value if you don't know where and how to put it to use. We owe it to them to articulate how our classes will help them go on to greater (and, yes, more lucrative) things.

Teaching *Controlling the Discourse* has helped me to see that pragmatic theory provides students with valuable, empowering skills. I am glad that students in the class learned who Grice is, where ellipsis can and can't occur in English, what dependent and independent variables are, and so forth, but I am most proud of the fact that we made them more intelligent, skeptical consumers of others' utterances. The course title suggests, not unfairly, that discourse can be a struggle for control of important issues, and we taught our students how to navigate this mess intelligently and successfully.

It is all well and good to tell students this, but it was more valuable to let them experience it. That was the goal of the "Great Debates" we held in the final class meetings.

In Spring, 2009, the great debate centered around the dialogue in (3) above, from *Bronston v. United States*. The question: Did Bronston perjure himself here? We provided just the basic context, the short piece of dialogue, and a passage outlining the basics of perjury. The debate would run like this: after an initial vote on the issue, the class would split into two teams. One team would be tasked with arguing for perjury, the other against. Each team would have fifteen minutes to build its initial case and five minutes to present that case, with time for follow-up questions from the opposing team and from Lyn and me. The teams would then retreat to prepare one-minute closing statements. After those were presented, a second vote, to assess what influence the debate had had. The winning team would be the one that converted the most votes to its side.

Both sides attacked both the dialogue and the definition of perjury, identifying places where pragmatic enrichment was required and seeking to exploit those, if not to support their position then at least to question our basic understanding of what happened in that courtroom. What does it mean to tell the whole truth? This is surely bounded by relevance. Can we determine what Bronston thought was relevant? Does it matter? Can we be sure that Bronston knew about all his personal accounts? Perhaps the maxim of quality prevented him from offering a direct answer. What background assumptions are we making about companies, their owners,

and the relationships between them, and how might these assumptions have shaped the discourse? Not all indirect answers are misleading. Some are quite cooperative. How should we classify Bronston's?

Our initial vote on the question of whether Bronston had perjured himself resulted in a slight majority of "yes" votes. The post-debate vote had roughly the same result. There was one thing they could agree on, though: *none of them* would be as naive as the lawyer was in this case. It now seemed inconceivable to them that Bronston's indirect answer slipped by without objection. I myself felt reassured that they now had the skills and confidence to keep control of their own discourses.

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