



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Inference

NB: "Inference" is a philosophical topic which goes beyond the scope of this presentation. Here, we are concerned with linguistic inferences as opposed to statistical inferences or archaeological inferences.



Basic idea

- When we come across sentences and texts, we often make some **inferences**.
- E.g. If we hear ...
John was assassinated.

We infer that John was a politically or socially important person.

Basic idea

- When presented with any linguistic expression, one is often able to derive some other proposition or information.
- That derived information or proposition is called an **inference**.
- Linguists are interested in how information and propositions may be obtained from linguistic expressions.

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Inferences from words

Bryan killed Vince.

Inferences:

- Bryan did something.
- What Bryan did had an effect on Vince.
- Consequently, Vince is dead.

The inferences comes from the meaning of the word *kill*.
Semanticists would analyze the inferences to figure out that the meaning of *kill* would be something like **X ACT and CAUSE Y to BECOME dead**.

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Inferences from affixes

1. *Carrie painted her cabinets.*
2. *Carrie repainted her cabinets.*

If (2) is true, can we conclude ...?

- a. The cabinets had paint on them before Carrie repainted them.
- ~~b. Carrie painted the cabinets before.~~

By analyzing the inferences, semanticists figure out that the meaning of *re-* would require **the existence of any state** indicated by the **stem to which *re-* attaches**.

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Inferences from discourse

Consider this dialogue:

Peter: Could you tell me where the library is please?

Susie: It's already 8 pm.

Inference: Susie believes the library is closed so it's pointless to know where it is.

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Puzzles from Inferences

Consider the English suffix *-er*

1. *I am pretty.*
2. *I am prettier.*

Can you infer (1) from (2)?

Isn't it puzzling that *-er* appears to have made me prettier but not necessarily pretty?

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Puzzles from Inferences

Puzzling effects can come from constructions too.

1. *Bryan killed Vince this morning.*
2. *Did Bryan kill Vince this morning?*
3. *Was it Bryan who killed Vince this morning?*

We can infer that Vince is dead in (1). That inference disappears in (2), but not (3).

Isn't it puzzling what questions can do?

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Inferences in linguistics

- The main kinds of inferences relevant in linguistics (in particular semantics and pragmatics) are:
 - Entailment
 - Presupposition
 - Implicature

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The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
Hong Kong Baptist University.

