

Summary: Beyond the sentence

We don't usually encounter sentences in isolation. Rather, listeners hear a string of sentences in a row, and their job is to see how they all fit together to construct some larger meaning.

Often times, a speaker's meaning is not reflected in the literal utterance that they might say. For instance, I might say *Can you pass me the candy?* You as a listener know that I am not asking about your literal ability to do this – rather, I'm politely making a request. Additionally, the stress and intonation patterns you use (your **prosody**) can affect meaning; consider the way the sentence *I never said she stole my money* changes depending on which word you emphasize. These kinds of non-literal meaning are studied by language scientists who study **pragmatics**.

Listeners make pragmatic **inferences** all the time, making assumptions that guide them to understand a speaker's intention. In the 1970s, Paul Grice described a set of conversational **maxims** that guide cooperative conversation. They are, in brief:

1. The maxim of quality – Speakers are truthful.
2. The maxim of relation – Speakers say things that are relevant.
3. The maxim of quantity – Speakers are as informative as possible and no more. For instance, someone wouldn't say usually "some" if they meant "all."
4. The maxim of manner – Speakers talk in an orderly fashion and usually don't talk in a roundabout way.

Pragmatic knowledge is helpful for understanding how sentences fit together and allow us to see of the "big picture" meaning. This is particularly helpful in that it allows listeners to build a **mental model** (or **situation model**) of exactly what is happening in a given scenario. As we hear additional sentences, our understanding of the situation may change, and so we update our mental models of the situation. We rely very heavily on the mental models that we form – as listeners, we aren't very good at remembering the exact details of what was said to us, but we do remember the mental model we constructed.