The pragmatics and prosody of declarative 'questions' (and interrogative questions)

Matthijs Westera

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
(University of Amsterdam)

Konstanz, 23-11-2017

Prelude (1/2): a simple question

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HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR SPOUSE WITHOUT FIGHTING IN 7 SIMPLE STEPS

STEP 1
Pay attention to your spouse whenever you have a conversation.

STEP 2
Don't yell at your spouse when you are trying to convey a message or talking to each other.

STEP 3
Put yourself in your spouse's shoes so you can see the issue from your their point of view.

STEP 4
Confirm understanding by asking your spouse if they understand what you are communicating to them.

STEP 5
Try using different communication methods when your spouse does not understand something you said.

STEP 6
Take a break if you are not making progress communicating your thoughts or start to feel frustrated.

STEP 7
Apply the above steps every time you communicate with your spouse.

www.ourpeacefulfamily.com/communicatebetter

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What justifies this new belief?

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      M: Hello, my name is Mark Liberman...?   Quantity

(5)   A: Bonjour!
      B: Bonjour, I'd like... err... je veux... a black coffee?   Manner

Main characteristics of the Quality-suspending kind (Gunlogson 2008):

▶ **question-likeness**, e.g., uncertain truth, inviting "yes" / "no" answer;

2.1. The Quality-suspending kind

(2) A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
     B: It's raining?   Quality

(3) B: What do you think of your new neighbor?
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(2) A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
     B: It's raining?

2.2. Main characteristics (1/3): question-likeness

(2) A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
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From Farkas & Roelofsen 2017:

(8) a.   'Is it raining', she wondered/asked.
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2.3. Main characteristics (2/3): speaker bias

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From Gunlogson 2003:

(10) *(At a committee hearing:)*
     a.   Are you a member of the Communist party?

2.3. Main characteristics (2/3): speaker bias

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From Gunlogson 2003:

(10) *(At a committee hearing:)*
   a. Are you a member of the Communist party?
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▶ In (2) the source of the bias is *contextual evidence*;

▶ but this need not be the case (Poschmann 2008, Gunlogson 2008):

(11) *(On the phone with Schiphol information.)*   [from Beun 2000]
       Caller: Hello. I have to go to Barcelona, from Amsterdam.
               Can you tell me which flights leave next Sunday?
       Agent: Just a moment. ... Yes, there are several flights. One
               leaves at 9.10, one at 11.10, and one at 17.30.
       Caller: The flight takes about three hours?

(2)   A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
      B: It's raining?

2.4. Main characteristics (3/3): badness out-of-the-blue

(2) A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
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(12) *(With no contextual setup:)*
     a.   Is the weather supposed to be nice this weekend?

2.4. Main characteristics (3/3): badness out-of-the-blue

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(12) *(With no contextual setup:)*
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Hence:
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Hence:
- **Speaker bias:** the speaker considers the proposition expressed likely (for whatever reason, contextual or otherwise);
- **Badness out of the blue:** What needs to be contextually present is not evidence, but something like the *topic of discourse*.

2.5. Previous work

Final rise on declarative would:

- ▶ express incompleteness, contingency, open-endedness etc.;   (many)

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- most don't generalize to other rising declaratives (or beyond);

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- most don't try to explain all three characteristics;
- those that do, end up assuming rather than explaining them.

Outline

Preview of the explanations

[SPOILER ALERT]

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[SPOILER ALERT]

Question-likeness:

Speaker bias:

Badness out-of-the-blue:

Preview of the explanations

[SPOILER ALERT]

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- ▶ one may risk violating Quality only if the risk is sufficiently small;

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even if it sounds
plausible
that doesn't mean
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Outline

3.1. What are maxims, anyway?

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goals   *beliefs*

what is uttered

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Building primarily on:

- Grice 1975 (1989): sentence meaning vs. speaker meaning;
- Roberts 1996 (2012)

3.1. What are maxims, anyway?

goals   *beliefs*

speaker meaning

sentence meaning

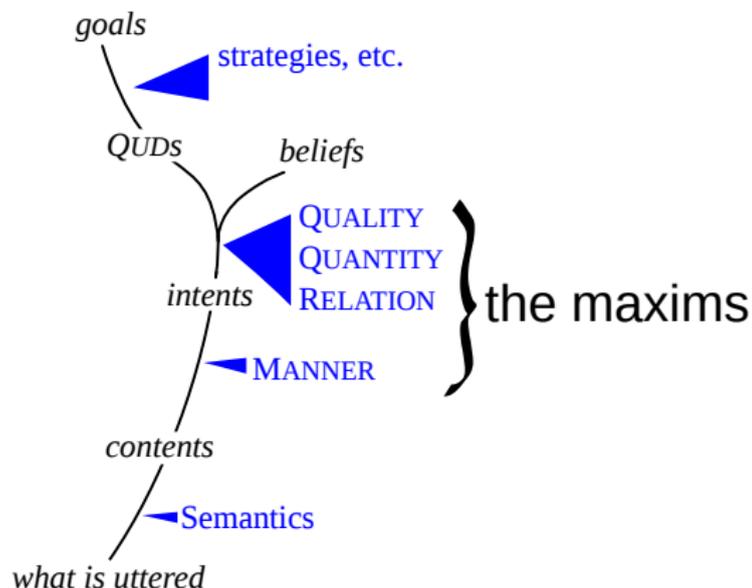*what is uttered*

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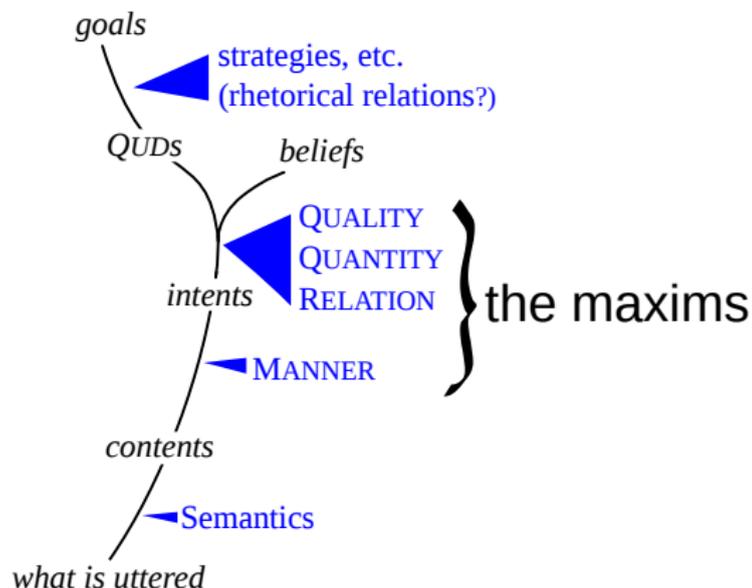- ▶ Roberts 1996 (2012): questions under discussion (QUD)

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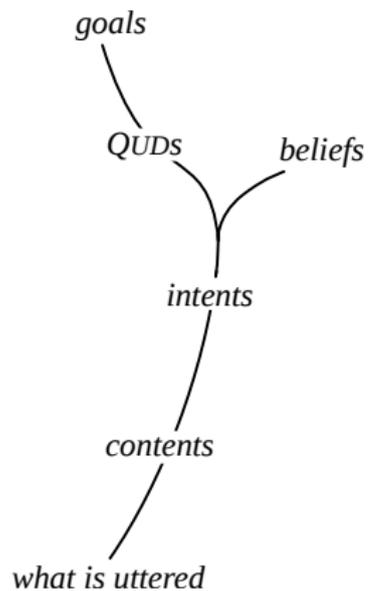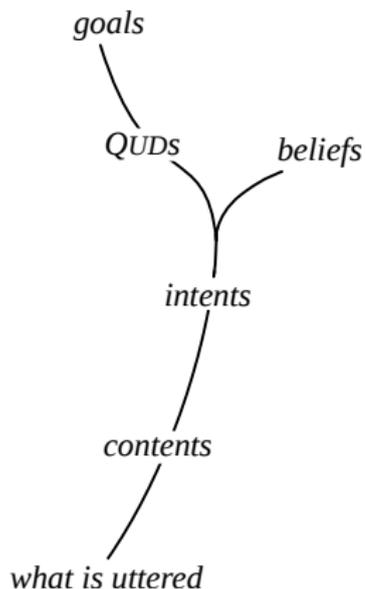# 3.1. What are maxims, anyway?


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          goals
             \
           QUDs    beliefs
              \    /
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                 \
              contents
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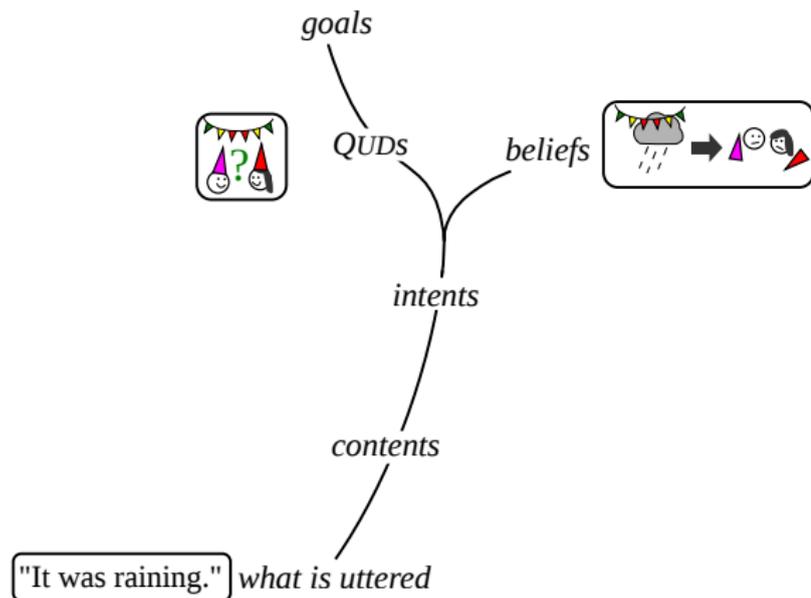- ▶ Roberts 1996 (2012): questions under discussion (QUD)

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goals

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intents

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(14) *(It's common knowledge that J+M never attend rainy parties.)*
    a. A: Were John and Mary at the party?
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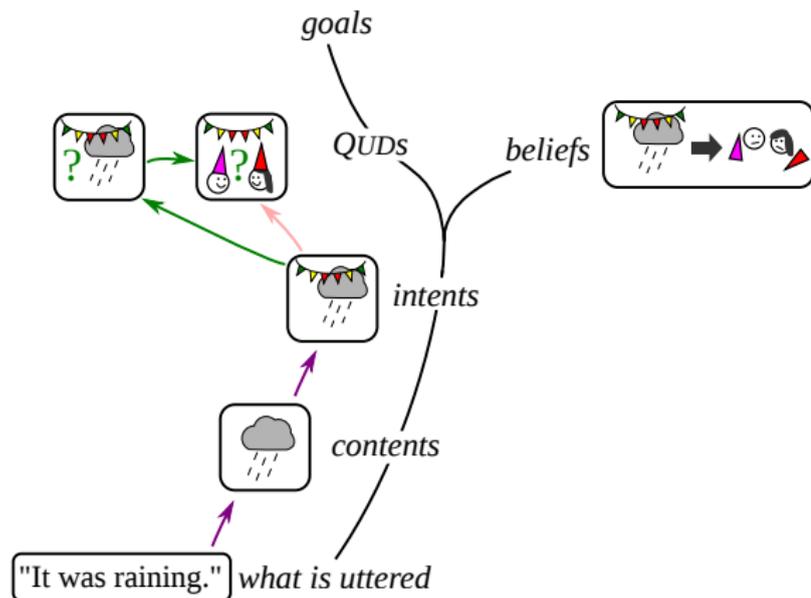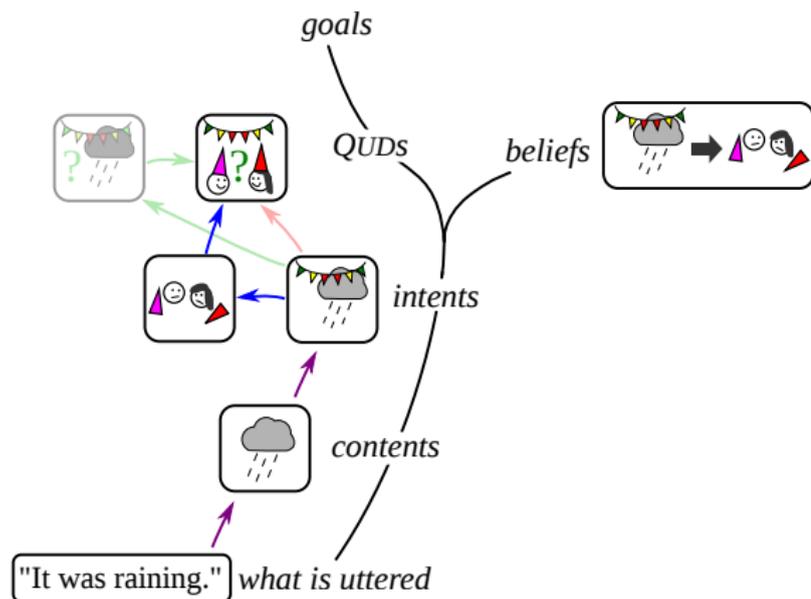   a. A: Were John and Mary at the party?
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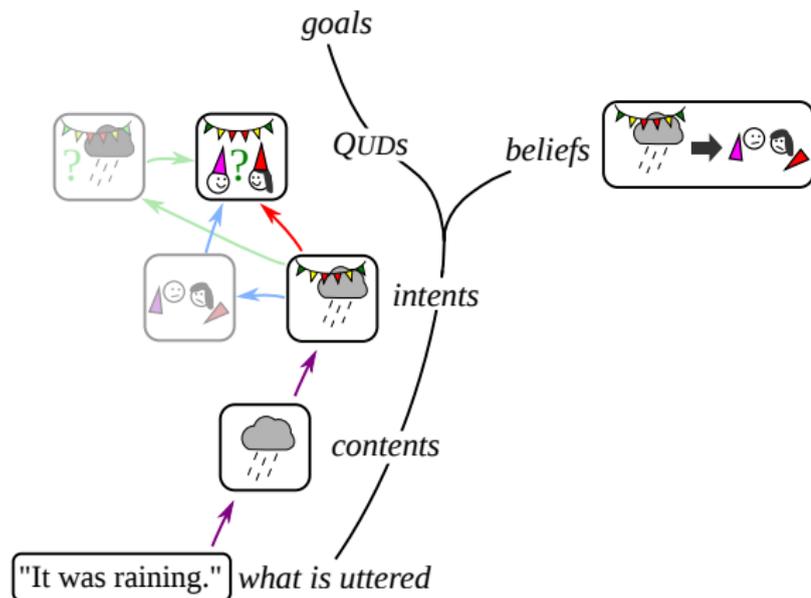 a. A: Were John and Mary at the party?
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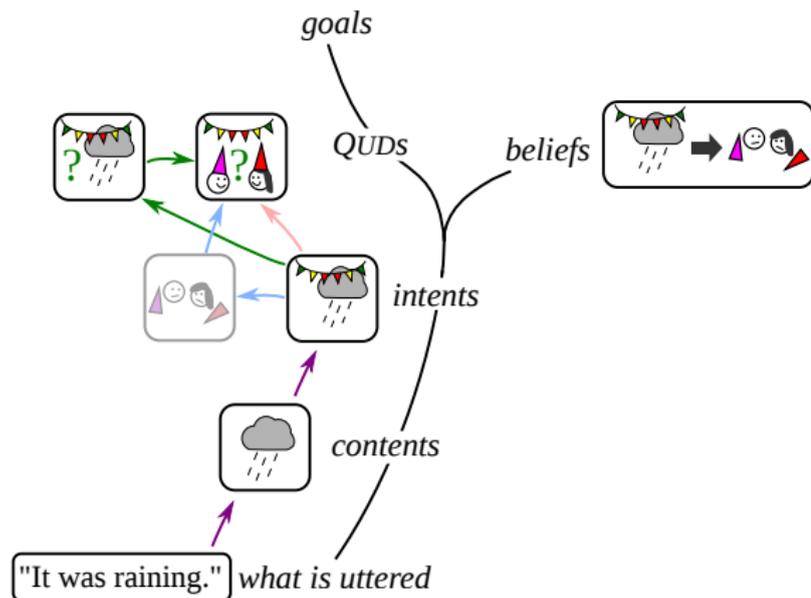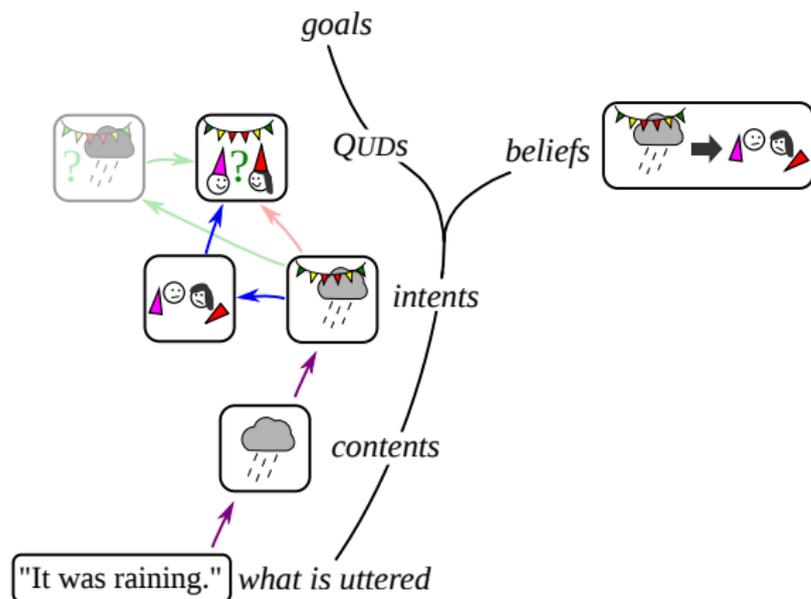
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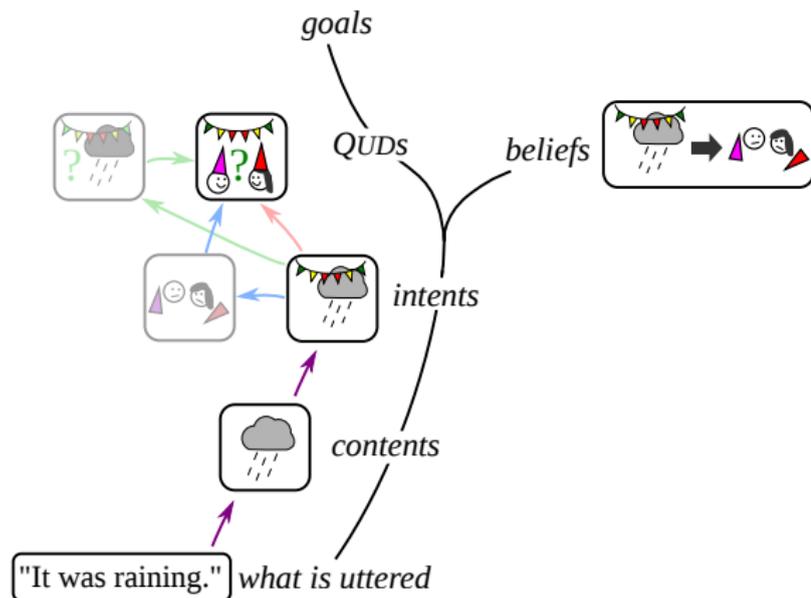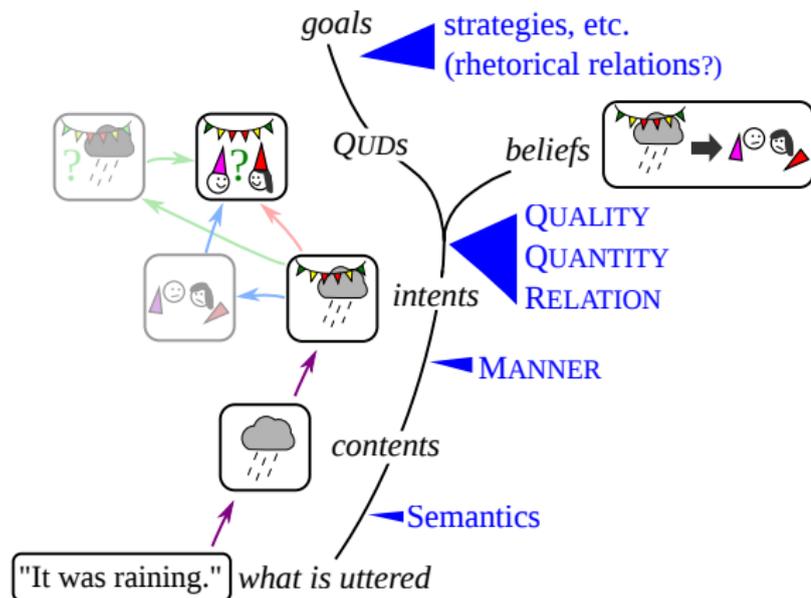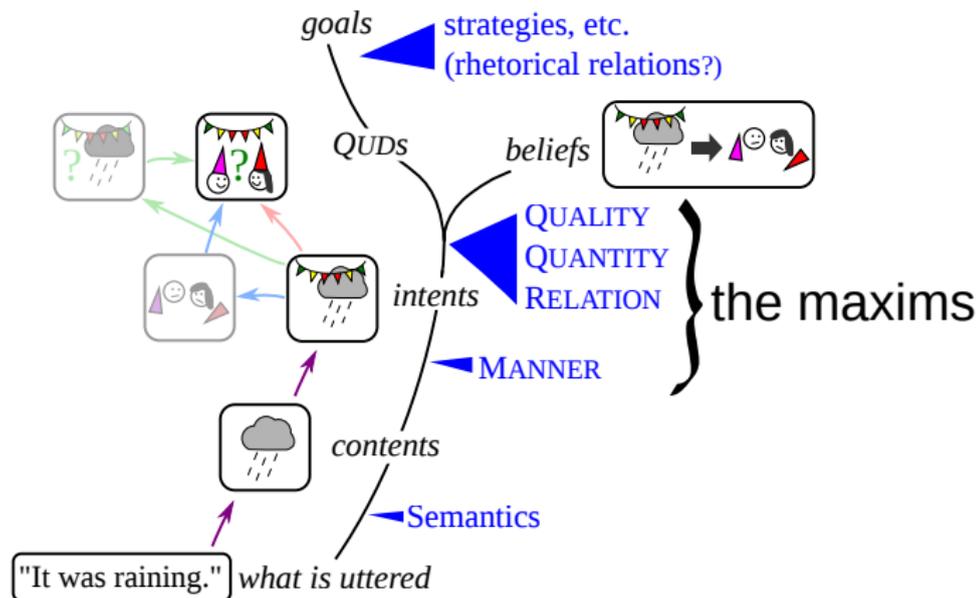
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- ▶ these details were put into place to *fit* intonation;
- ▶ but they have wider implications.

3.4. Why suspend a maxim at all?

Assumption 3: A speaker will try to ensure compliance with all the maxims, suspending (= knowingly violate or risk violating) a maxim only if ensuring compliance was impossible.

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Also interesting:

- ▶ The only reason to suspend Quality is a clash with Relation, i.e., if there is no answer to the QUD which the speaker believes is true.

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Concretely, with the current definition:

- ▶ Quality suspensions can be blamed only on a clash with Relation.

Outline

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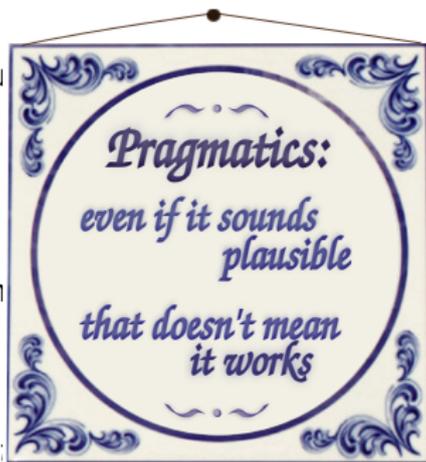
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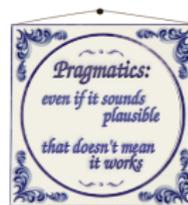
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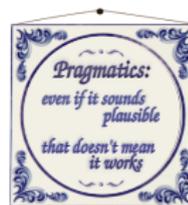Hence the speaker is uncertain about the truth.

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(*: How would an addressee figure this out?)
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(15) A: Hey B, guess what the weather is like.
   B: I have absolutely no idea; I haven't been outside in days.
   A: Guess!!!
   B: Fine. It's raining?

4.4. Badness out of the blue (1/3)

Pragmatics:
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Let's remind ourselves:

(13) *(On the phone with Schiphol information.)*

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Agent: One leaves at 9.10, one at 11.10, and one at 17.30.

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Summing up:

▶ the required contextual setup is not the speaker bias;
▶ rather, it is something like the topic, or QUD;
▶ interrogatives, by contrast, are fine without contextual setup...

Suspending a maxim is only one way of dealing with a clash; an alternative is *opting out*:

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Complication:
- ▶ whether QUD is already 'on the table' is partly up to the speaker...

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No apparent complementary distribution (Gunlogson, 2003):

(16)   A: *(Enters with an umbrella.)*
      B: a. It's raining?
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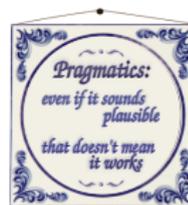
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Core prediction: rising declaratives are fine if, and only if:

- ▶ the context presents an *opportunity* for the speaker to present the QUD as being already 'on the table';
- ▶ and the speaker decides, for rhetorical reasons (etc.), to take it up.

Outline

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(and by being rather precise about what that means):

- ▶ the ICM theory predicts the various uses of rising declaratives;
- ▶ while also explaining core characteristics of, in this case, the Quality-suspending kind.
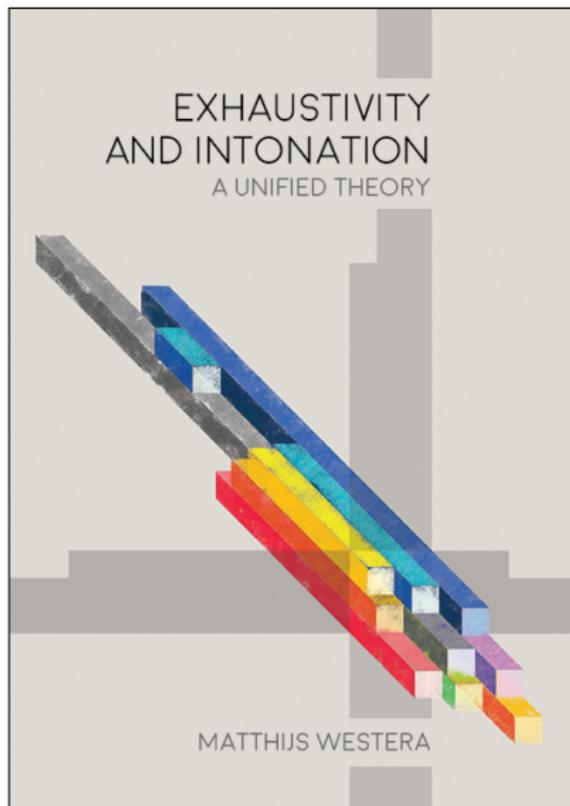
5.3. Returning to "Prelude (1/2): a simple question"

How does communication work?

For example:

(17) A: We ran out of vegetables.

Hearing (1), we come to believe that they ran out of vegetables.

What justifies this new belief?

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR SPOUSE WITHOUT FIGHTING IN 7 SIMPLE STEPS

STEP 1
Pay attention to your spouse whenever you have a conversation.

STEP 2
Don't yell at your spouse when you are trying to convey a message or talking to each other.

STEP 3
Put yourself in your spouse's shoes so you can see the issue from your their point of view.

STEP 4
Confirm understanding by asking your spouse if they understand what you are communicating to them.

STEP 5
Try using different communication methods when your spouse does not understand something you said.

STEP 6
Take a break if you are not making progress communicating your thoughts or start to feel frustrated.

STEP 7
Apply the above steps every time you communicate with your spouse.

www.ourpeacefulfamily.com/communicatebetter