

Pragmatics



Pragmatics is one component of the study of human language, and can therefore be described as a branch of the academic discipline of linguistics. It has emerged relatively recently, certainly within the last half century, but is now an important and thriving area that continues to expand and develop. Concepts, theories and approaches developed within pragmatics are being used by those working in many other areas: both in other branches of linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, stylistics and psycholinguistics, and in different disciplines, such as artificial intelligence, clinical psychology and even law. Territory.

More precise and specific statements about pragmatics tend to be prefaced with comments such as ‘ some linguists argue that . ‘ and ‘ it could be said that ‘ Perhaps surprisingly, this includes definitions of what pragmatics actually is. In other words, pragmatics (the term generally applied to those working in the field) don’t all have the same ideas about what they are studying. Everyone agrees that pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning.

But beyond that there are a lot of different possible ways of defining precisely what aspects and types of meaning are the particular subject matter of pragmatics.

Quite a good short description, one that is useful for explaining to people what you are studying and that steers clear of many of the major controversies, is that it is concerned with ‘ meaning in context’. However, as you read around the subject you will come across definitions that range from the informal (it’s about what people mean rather than what they say’)

through the more precise (it concerns meaning in use rather than literal meaning') to the highly technical (it is the study of meaning minus truth conditions'). There are two main reasons why pragmatics currently accommodates such varied and diverse definitions.

The first is simply that it is itself a varied and diverse field of study, which covers many aspects of the relationship between meaning and context. There is, as e will see, something to be said in favor of all the definitions suggested above, as well as others that you may come across, even if none of them in isolation tells the whole story.

The second 1 2 INTRODUCTION reason for all the different definitions is that the various models, theories and schools of thought that make up pragmatics each have different ideas about what are the appropriate terms of the discussion.

For instance, not all pragmatics would agree that ' literal meaning, a concept that is central to one of the definitions above, even exists. Some would deny that it is legitimate to distinguish between pragmatic meaning and ' 00000 0000000000' as the third definition proposes. We will consider these differences of opinion, and others, later in this book. Before we can get involved with the particular implications of these different definitions, we need to begin thinking about what might be involved in studying the relationship between meaning and context.

This relationship is important every time anyone uses language to communicate, so we could take just about any instance of something that

someone has said or written, but let's start with the following spoken example: 1 .

Towards the end, with the light, it was tough. A very natural first reaction to this example might well be that it is clearly taken out of context, and that without some background information it is impossible to work out what is being communicated here.

This reaction illustrates our awareness that meaning is closely bound up with context. If you are used to analyzing examples in grammatical sentence.

So the problem with interpretation can't be that the example is in some way incomplete in itself or is just a fragment. The sentence may be complete but it doesn't contain sufficient information within itself to tell us what is being communicated. For many aspects of what is being communicated we need some further particulars of the context in which this example was spoken.

Note, however, that even without any such particulars there are some things that we do know about the meaning of this example; we are not totally at a loss as to what we can understand from it.

For instance, we know that someone is describing an event or situation that took place at some point in the past. We can also form some general ideas about what types of things might be described by words such as 'end', 'light' and 'tough', although even these ideas will have to remain both vague and tentative. We know these things simply because we are speakers of the English language.

That is, our knowledge is based on what we have learnt, either as little children or more recently, about the vocabulary and the grammar of the language. One way of putting this is to say that this knowledge is part of our knowledge of the 000000000 of English. We will consider semantics, and in particular its relationship to and difference from pragmatics, in more detail in the next chapter.

Even if we are fully competent in the English language, there are many questions about example (1) that we simply can't answer.

We can't say, for instance, when the tuition in question occurred, what particular light is mentioned, or what the pronoun 'it' refers to. Furthermore, without knowing what 'it' refers to we can't be sure what exact properties are being described by the adjective 'tough'. There are many different ways in which we use 'tough' in our everyday language.

A pair of trousers, a math problem, a decision and a piece of beef can all be described as 'tough'. All these aspects of meaning, and more beside, can only be settled once we learn some more about the context in which the example was spoken.

In fact, example (1) is a quotation from an interview with the tennis player Roger Federer on 6 July 2008. He had just lost the men's singles final at Wimbledon to the relative newcomer Rafael Nadal in a hard-fought match that had continued into the evening when it was almost dark. This amount of information, which would of course have been readily available to the original audience of Federer's remark, immediately fills in many of the blanks in our understanding of what was being communicated in example (1).

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We now know, for example, that the past tense verb 'Was' relates to an event that occurred just a little time before Feeder was speaking, that the light offered to was the ambient daylight in the late evening on a July day in south-west London, that the pronoun 'it' refers to a particular tennis match, or perhaps to Feeder's experience of playing in that match, and that 'tough' is being used in the concerned themselves with all these different types of context-dependent meaning, and we will look at them in turn during the course of this book.

However, there are further aspects of what might generally be described as the meaning of example (1) that we have not touched on yet. These are not so straightforwardly identified by looking at the particular words that Feeder used and then thinking about what the specific context can tell us about how to understand them. They are concerned with why Feeder chose to use these words on this occasion, with what particular point he was making in using them, or with what we might informally describe as what Feeder meant by what he said.

A natural interpretation of what Feeder meant, so natural that you are hardly likely to pause to think about it much, is that his experience towards the end of the game was tough because of the light, or more specifically because the light was failing.

But notice that all that he actually said was that the toughness occurred 'With' the light not 'because of it.

Our perfectly natural assumption that he meant that the light was a cause of the toughness comes from certain types of knowledge that we have acquired

as users of the language, but it doesn't come from our knowledge of the language itself; we know perfectly well that 'With' and 'because' have distinct meanings. We might say that Feeder didn't literally say that the light caused the toughness but he certainly very strongly implied or suggested it. A major concern of pragmatics is what it is about our knowledge of how language is used that helps us to understand implications or suggestions of this type.

Later in the book we will look at various different explanations of the rules or principles of interpretation that allow us to understand meaning in context beyond literal meaning: in effect, the rules that get us from 'With' to 'because' in example (1). There is still more to be said about what Feeder meant by example (1) in terms of what he might have been implying or suggesting beyond the literal meaning of the words he used.

On the face of it, example (1) is a simple description of an event or of a person's experience of an event.

But a number of commentators suggested at the time that Feeder might have intended it as an implicit criticism of the umpire for not halting the match on the grounds of poor light or as an indirect suggestion that Naiad's victory was not entirely fair. We would of course need much more than knowledge of English and of the basic details of the context to evaluate suggestions of this sort. Even if we have access to many other factors, our claims about what Feeder really meant would have to remain tentative.

Nevertheless, this type of implicit or indirect meaning is interesting precisely because it shows how far what is communicated in context can be from basic semantic meaning.

It is a central and pervasive concern of pragmatics, and is a type of meaning that will be a major concern throughout this book. Types of pragmatics We have begun to think, so far in very general and non-technical terms, about the sorts of features of communication, and the types of meaning, that are the subject matter of pragmatics.

Like the various other branches of linguistics, pragmatics forms one part of our attempts to find out about human language and communication. As such, it is of obvious importance and interest; it is one aspect of the much wider human endeavour to discover what we can about ourselves. Indeed, many linguists would argue that in studying language we are studying something that makes us distinctively and uniquely human.

But in pragmatics, language is not studied in isolation or as a closed system that can be straightforwardly identified and then analysed.

Rather, as we have seen, pragmatics start to get interested when language can be studied in relation to the context in which it is produced or the ways in which people use it in their everyday interactions. Pragmatics is concerned not just with who we are as human beings, but with how we use language to do all the various things that enable us to relate to, understand and possibly influence other people: describing the world around us, learning about how others feel about things, getting other people to do things for us, as well as many other examples.

In the next section of this chapter we will look at how pragmatics connects with linguistics and how it relates to but remains recognizably distinct from other branches of the discipline, particularly those that deal with meaning or with aspects of context.

These other branches might be said to define the borders of pragmatics, or to give an indication of what is the subject matter of pragmatics and what belongs in other areas of study. At one extreme we have semantics, which for now we can loosely define as being the study of the meaning of language without any consideration of contexts of use or as the formal study of linguistic meaning.

The relationship between semantics and pragmatics is so intricate, and so important to a full understanding of pragmatics, that it forms the subject of the whole of the next chapter. At the other extreme, at what we might call the ‘contextual’ end, we have branches of linguistics that are concerned only with instances of language as it is actually used and generally have little time for any discussion of TYPES OF PRAGMATICS 5 ‘linguistic meaning’ as something distinct from meaning in context and worthy of study in its own right.

Such branches are often concerned with fairly long stretches of language use or with the ways in which language use relates to broader social and cultural systems.

They include discourse analysis, conversation analysis and sociolinguistics. Pragmatics occupies the space between these two extremes. Some realists have a lot in common with semanticists in terms of their interests, discourse

analysts. This suggests a wide range of activities and types of study going on within a single branch of linguistics, and pragmatics is indeed a very broad category, with various identifiable versions and subdivisions.

It is as well at this early stage for us to get a clear picture of what type of pragmatics we will be concentrating on in this book. At first glance the range of different work to be found in a publication such as the *Journal of Pragmatics* could be bewildering to anyone trying to find out about what pragmatic is and how it is practices. This is a major forum for many researchers to publish their work and, as the title suggests, all these researchers would consider themselves to be doing pragmatics.

But in one issue, chosen more or less at random, we can find: an article on how best to account formally for the differences between pairs of ‘belief sentences’, that is sentences that are used to assign beliefs and thoughts to other people (Capons 2008); a study of the antinational choices of teachers (Irisés-Brinier and Roomer-Trill 2008); an analysis of some taped investigations between female friends focusing on disagreement and humor in cross-cultural communication (Habit 2008); and a brief discussion of the relationship between language and logic (Fully 2008).

These four articles all have very different preoccupations and emphases from each other, all use different types of data, and all have different working methodologies.

Beyond a focus on the very broadly defined topic of ‘meaning in context’ suggested at the start of this chapter, it is difficult from this range of work to get very far in describing what pragmatics is and how it is done. The picture

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can be clarified a little if we draw a rough and in some ways not entirely satisfactory distinction between two different types of pragmatics currently being practices.

We might describe these as 'theoretical pragmatics' and 'social pragmatics'. The former concentrates on the analysis of particular aspects of meaning, and on how these might be explained within more general formal accounts of language use. The latter focuses on various aspects of the relationship between language use and more general social and cultural factors.

Yang Hung (2007: 4) identifies the split in pragmatic as being between 'Anglo-American' and 'European Continental' schools of thought, reflecting the fact that these two approaches are generally associated with different geographical locations and traditions of thought.

Each has an identifiable and distinct history that reveals something of the influences that have gone in to making up present day pragmatics.

Theoretical pragmatics can trace its beginnings to the Anglo-American tradition of the philosophy of language, and still has much in common in terms of approach and outlook with that tradition. Social pragmatics developed out of work by anthropologists and sociologists that had a particular emphasis on communication.

Looking again at the four articles from the Journal of Pragmatics mentioned above in the light of this general division belonging to theoretical pragmatics, and the second and third as belonging to social pragmatics.

This book will focus on theoretical pragmatics of the Anglo-American tradition. It will consider the main types of context-dependent meaning and the principal assumptions and methodologies that constitute pragmatics as a separate branch of linguistics.

It will also trace the development of theoretical pragmatics from ideas that originated in British and American philosophy of language through to being an established field of study in its own right. We will not be ignoring other types of pragmatics altogether. In fact, one of the aims of this book is to show just how important pragmatics has been in terms of its relationships with and influence on other types of language study, both within linguistics and beyond.

But theoretical pragmatics will be the main topic of this account of the subject.

Unless otherwise specified, the term ‘pragmatics’ can generally be read here as convenient shorthand or theoretical or Anglo-American pragmatics’. One of the most striking differences between theoretical pragmatics and social pragmatics, and one that is very telling about their different aims and emphases, is the difference between the types of data they use. To put it another way, the two different types of pragmatics demonstrate different ideas about what counts as the appropriate type of examples to be discussing, analyzing and seeking to explain.

If you look through an article from theoretical pragmatics, such as the one on belief sentences mentioned above, you will notice that it includes discussion

of examples such as the following: 2. Alexander believes that Cicero was a great orator of the past.

3. Alexander does not believe that Tulips was a great orator of the past.

(Capons 2008: 1023) It isn't necessary for the author of the article to provide details about who said these things when, or who they were talking to. In fact, it's not even necessary that they must have been things that anyone ever actually said or wrote, other than for the purposes of pragmatic analysis.

The examples used in theoretical pragmatics are chosen because they are illustrative of certain features of language use and interpretation that are potentially interesting and in need of systematic explanation. In this particular case, once you know that 'Cicero' and 'Tulips' were in fact two different names for the same person, examples (2) and (3) raise the interesting point that these two statements can both be made, and be made sincerely, even though they would seem literally to be incompatible or contradictory with each other.

If Alexander doesn't know that 'Cicero' and 'Tulips' refer to the same person, then both (2) and (3) can be true. This observation raises various questions about the effect and behavior of the expression 'believes that' questions that theoretical pragmatics are interested in exploring further.

7 by lots of examples such as the following: 4. Dee: I said. Well, I said if you decide not to do this, I'll give you the twenty hundred dollars You know, I mean the level of stress is.

Natalie is just like Stan, everything is negative and everything is stressful and. Latin: -? -? but why don't they get the house, I mean (continues to say something which is unclear because of the overlap) Beatrice: [why does it have to be so expensive or so big or? Dee: () the family well they have to reinvest. Unnamable: That is the-the family.

((3-second pause)) Beatrice: It is the expectation of() (Habit 2008: 1127)

The differences between example (4) and examples (2) and (3) are many and obvious.

To start with, example (4) is much longer. Unlike the single utterances in (2) and (3), the example to be analysed in (4) stretches over several turns in a conversation. Secondly, the individual speakers are identified. In fact, earlier in the article we are given some brief details about them, such as their age, nationality and educational status. In this case, unlike in the case of examples (2) and (3) above, it matters to the analysis who was speaking and in what context.

Perhaps most strikingly, example (4) is an extract from the careful transcription of a natural conversation that really did take place between a group of speakers at a particular point in time and space. It is presented complete with the hesitations, pauses, false starts and errors that are characteristic of everyday language use. For the purposes of this study, the authenticity of the data is crucial. The article from which the example is taken is concerned with questions about the role of disagreement and humor in cultural learning in cross-cultural communication.

It is possible to investigate such matters only by looking at how real people actually behave in particular settings. It's also worth noting that this article belongs to a particular type of social pragmatics known as 'cross-cultural pragmatics', which is concerned specifically with how communication operates in different cultural and language settings, and also between speakers from different cultural and language backgrounds.

Agricultural pragmatics will not be a major topic in this book because of our focus on theoretical rather than on social pragmatics.