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## **Discourse and Pragmatics**

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## Discourse and Pragmatics

This chapter presents an overview of research in the area of pragmatics that is of relevance to people interested in looking at language from a discourse perspective. It discusses the relationship between language and context, a key issue in the area of pragmatics as well as in the area of discourse analysis. It also looks at ways in which people typically perform speech acts (such as apologizing or requesting, etc.) in spoken and written discourse. The chapter discusses the reasons we choose to perform a speech act in a particular way such as, for example, reasons of politeness. The ways in which people perform speech acts across cultures is also discussed, as well as what happens when people do not follow culture-specific expectations for performing particular speech acts.

### 3.1 What is pragmatics?

Pragmatics is the study of meaning in relation to the context in which a person is speaking or writing. This includes social, situational and textual context. It also includes background knowledge context; that is, what people know about each other and about the world. Pragmatics assumes that when people communicate with each other they normally follow some kind of cooperative principle; that is, they have a shared understanding of how they should cooperate in their communications. The ways in which people do this, however, varies across cultures. What may be a culturally appropriate way of saying or doing something in one culture may not be the same in another culture. The study of this use of language across cultures is called cross-cultural pragmatics. The relationship between linguistic form and communicative function is of central interest in the area of pragmatics and, as Cameron (2001) argues, is highly relevant to the field of discourse analysis. We need to know the communicative function of an utterance, that is, what it is 'doing' in the particular setting in order to assign a discourse label to the utterance in the place of the overall discourse. For example, if someone says 'The bus was late' they may be complaining about the bus service (and so we label the stage of the conversation 'complaint'), they may be explaining why they are late as a follow up to an apology (and so we label the stage of the conversation 'explanation') or they may be doing something else. We also need to know what this meaning is in order to understand, at a broader level, what people typically say and do as they perform particular genres in particular social and cultural settings.

### 3.2 Language, context and discourse

An understanding of how language functions in context is central to an understanding of the relationship between what is said and what is understood in spoken and written discourse. The context of situation (see Chapter 1) of what someone says is, therefore, crucial to understanding and interpreting the meaning of what is being said. This includes the physical context, the social context and the mental worlds and roles of the people involved in the interaction. Each of these impacts on what we say and how other people interpret what we say in spoken and written discourse. A conversation between two people in a restaurant may mean different things to the actual people speaking, something different to a 'side participant' in the conversation (such as someone sitting next to one of the speakers),

something different to a 'bystander' (such as the waiter) and again something different to someone who may be eavesdropping the conversation (Verschueren 1999 ). Equally, a student's assignment written for a law course takes on a different meaning if it is re-typed on the letterhead of a law firm and addressed to a client. The text then takes on the status and function of 'a piece of legal advice' and the reader's interpretation of the text is significantly different from the way in which it would have been read by the student's professor (Freedman 1989 ). The linguistic context in terms of what has been said and what is yet to be said in the discourse also has an impact on the intended meaning and how someone may interpret this meaning in spoken and written discourse. There are, then, a number of key aspects of context that are crucial to the production and interpretation of discourse. These are the situational context in terms of what people 'know about what they can see around them', the background knowledge context in terms of what people 'know about each other and the world' and the co-textual context in terms of what people 'know about what they have been saying' (Cutting 2008 : 5). Background knowledge context includes cultural knowledge and interpersonal knowledge. That is, it includes what people know about the world, what they know about various areas of life, what they know about each other (Cutting 2008 ) and what they know about the norms and expectations of the particular discourse community (see Chapter 2 ) in which the communication is taking place. Contextual knowledge also includes social, political and cultural understandings that are relevant to the particular communication (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000 ). As Thomas ( 1995 : 22) explains: meaning is not something that is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone or the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic), and the meaning potential of an utterance. 40 Discourse Analysis Meaning, thus, is produced in interaction. It is jointly accomplished by both the speaker and the listener, or the writer and their reader. It involves social, psychological and cognitive factors that are relevant to the production and interpretation of what a speaker (or writer) says, and what a hearer (or reader) understands by what is said (Thomas 1995 ).

### **3.3 Speech acts and discourse**

Two influential works in the area of pragmatics relevant to the area of discourse analysis are Austin's ( 1962 ) *How to Do Things With Words* and Searle's ( 1969 ) *Speech Acts* . Austin and Searle argued that language is used to 'do things' other than just refer to the truth or falseness of particular statements. Their work appeared at a time when logical positivism was the prevailing view in the philosophy of language. The logical positivist view argued that language is always used to describe some fact or state of affairs, and unless a statement can be tested for truth or falsity it is basically meaningless. Austin and Searle observed that there are many things that we say which cannot meet these kinds of truth conditions but which are, nevertheless, valid and which do things that go beyond their literal meaning. They argued that in the same way that we perform physical acts, we also perform acts by using language. That is, we use language to give orders, to make requests, to give warnings or to give advice; in other words, to do things that go beyond the literal meaning of what we say. A central issue which underlies this is the relationship between the literal meaning, or propositional content , of what someone says and what the person intends by what he/she

says. Thus, if someone says 'It's hot in here' they are not only referring to the temperature, they may also be requesting someone to do something such as turn on the air conditioning. What we say, then, often has both a literal meaning and an illocutionary meaning (or illocutionary force ); that is, a meaning which goes beyond what someone, in a literal sense, has said. Austin argued that there are three kinds of acts which occur with everything we say. These are the locutionary act , the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act . The locutionary act refers to the literal meaning of the actual words (such as 'It's hot in here' referring to the temperature). The illocutionary act refers to the speaker's intention in uttering the words (such as a request for someone to turn on the air conditioning). The perlocutionary act refers to the effect this utterance has on the thoughts or actions of the other person (such as someone getting up and turning on the air conditioning). The following example on a bus illustrates this. Bus driver: This bus won't move until you boys move in out of the doorway. Clearly the bus driver is doing more than making a statement. He is also telling the boys to move. The locutionary act, in this case, is the driver saying he won't start the bus with Discourse and Pragmatics 41 people standing in the doorway, the illocutionary act is an order and the perlocutionary act is the boys moving inside the bus. It is not always easy, however, to identify the illocutionary force of what someone says, as it may also depend on the stage in the discourse as well as the social context in which the person is speaking. An illocutionary force, further, might be spread over more than one utterance. The example below, where the sales request is spread over several utterances, illustrates this: A: Hello, welcome to Hungry Jack's. Can I take your order please? B: Can I have a Whopper with egg and bacon . . . A: Would you like cheese with that? B: Yes please . . . and a junior Whopper with cheese . . . and large fries please. A: Would you like any drinks or dessert with that? B: No thank you. A: OK . . . that's a Whopper with cheese, egg and bacon, a Whopper junior with cheese and large fries. B: Yes. Thank you. A: OK . . . Please drive through. It is also not unusual for what someone says to have more than a single illocutionary force. For example, 'What are you doing tonight?' might be both a question and an invitation. A person might reply 'I still haven't finished my homework' treating the utterance as both a question and invitation which they decide not to accept. They may equally reply 'Nothing special. What do you feel like doing?' providing an answer to the question but this time accepting the (as yet unspoken) invitation.

### **Direct and indirect speech acts**

Sometimes when we speak we do mean exactly what we say. The following example from the BBC Panorama interview with the Princess of Wales is an example of this. Here, the interviewer asks Diana if she allowed her friends to talk to the author of her biography, Andrew Morton: Bashir: Did you allow your friends, your close friends, to speak to Andrew Morton? Diana: Yes I did. Yes I did. (BBC 1995 ) Often we do, however, say things indirectly. That is, we often intend something that is quite different from the literal meaning of what we say. For example a common expression on an invitation to a party is 'to bring a plate'. This may, to someone who is not familiar with this kind of cultural convention, be interpreted as a request to bring an (empty) plate to the party. In fact, it is asking someone to bring food to the party, not necessarily on a plate. Equally, if someone calls someone to ask them to come to their home for dinner and the 42 Discourse Analysis person being asked

says 'Can I bring anything?' in many countries the host will say 'No, just bring yourself' whereas, in fact, they expect the guest to bring wine (or in some countries something such as flowers for the host) with them to the dinner. The example above of 'Can I have a Whopper with egg and bacon . . .?' also illustrates this. Here, the customer is not asking about their ability to buy a hamburger – the literal meaning of the sentence – but making a sales request. This is very common in service encounters where 'can' is often used to refer to something other than ability or permission.

### **Felicity conditions and discourse**

An important notion in speech act theory is the concept of felicity conditions. For a speech act to 'work', Austin argued that there are a number of conditions that must be met. The first of these is that there must be a generally accepted procedure for successfully carrying out the speech act, such as inviting someone to a wedding through the use of a formal written wedding invitation, rather than (for many people) an informal email message. Also the circumstances must be appropriate for the use of the speech act. That is, someone must be getting married. The person who uses the speech act must be the appropriate person to use it in the particular context – such as the bride or groom's family, or in some cases the bride or groom, inviting the person to the wedding. A friend of the couple getting married cannot, for example, without the appropriate authority invite someone to the wedding. Austin argued that this procedure must be carried out correctly and completely. And the person performing the speech act must (in most circumstances) have the required thoughts, feelings and intentions for the speech act to be 'felicitous'. That is, the communication must be carried out by the right person, in the right place, at the right time and, normally, with a certain intention or it will not 'work'. If the first two of these conditions are not satisfied, the act will not be achieved and will 'misfire'. If the third of these conditions does not hold, then the procedure will be 'abused'.

### **Rules versus principles**

Searle took Austin's work further by arguing that the felicity conditions of an utterance are 'constitutive rules'. That is, they are not just something that can 'go right' (or wrong) or be 'abused' – which was Austin's view – but something which makes up and defines the act itself. That is, they are rules that need to be followed for the utterance to work. Thomas (1995) critiques this notion of constitutive rules and suggests that the notion of principles is perhaps more helpful to this discussion. She points out that it is extremely difficult to devise rules which will satisfactorily account for the complexity of speech act behaviour. She presents five basic differences between rules and principles to support her argument. The first of these is that rules are 'all or nothing', whereas principles are 'more or less'. That is, rules are 'yes/no' in their application whereas principles can be applied partially. Thus, you can speak extremely clearly, fairly clearly, or not at all clearly, rather than simply 'clearly'. Discourse and Pragmatics 43 Thomas also argues that rules are exclusive whereas principles can co-occur. Thus, using one rule precludes another whereas a number of principles (rather than rules) might apply at the same time. Rules aim to define a speech act whereas principles describe what people do. Further, whereas rules are definite, principles are 'probabilistic'; that is, they describe what is more or less likely to be the case, rather than

something which either does or does not apply. Finally Thomas argues that rules are arbitrary, whereas principles are 'motivated'. That is, people follow them for a reason, or purpose, to achieve a particular goal. If, for example, someone apologizes for something (in English) there is the assumption that they were responsible for what has been done (or in a position to represent this on someone else's behalf), have actually said 'I'm sorry', are sincere in what they say and will do something to rectify the situation, if this is required (or possible). The person may not be completely responsible for what was done, however, so it is more helpful to see this as a case of more or less, rather than yes or no. Equally, an apology is often more ritual than 'sincere' but has been carried out for a very important reason, so that the person being apologized to will feel better about the situation and the tension that was there will be resolved. Taking a principles-based view of speech act performance, rather than a rule-based one, thus, describes what people often do, or are most likely to do, when they apologize, rather than what they 'must' do.

### **Presupposition and discourse**

A further important notion in the area of speech act theory and pragmatics is presupposition. Presupposition refers to the common ground that is assumed to exist between language users such as assumed knowledge of a situation and/or of the world. This may come from sources such as books, television and the internet, or through personal experiences with the world. A speaker says something based on their assumption (or presupposition) of what the hearer is likely to 'know', and what they will infer from what they say. Two main kinds of presupposition are discussed in the area of pragmatics: conventional presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. Conventional presuppositions are less context-dependent than pragmatic presuppositions and are typically linked to particular linguistic forms. For example 'Would you like some coffee?' suggests the coffee is already prepared whereas 'Would you like anything to drink?' does not suggest a drink has already been prepared (Lo Castro 2003). Pragmatic presuppositions, however, are context-dependent and arise from the use of an utterance in a particular context. The following example in the delicatessen section of a supermarket illustrates this. The customers know they need to take a ticket from the ticket machine and wait their turn to be served. The person with the ticket with '2' on it is the next person to be served. B implicates what A has said as an offer of service to them (alone). A: Customer number two! B: Ah . . . could I have 250 grams of the honey smoked ham please?

44 Discourse Analysis Presuppositions are crucial to an understanding of what people mean by what they say in spoken and written discourse. Often, we presuppose a person will have a similar understanding to us in terms of what we mean by what we say. It is indeed because people make this assumption that discourse (normally) proceeds as smoothly as it does.