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A Course in Applied Linguistics

M.A. in English Language and Linguistics

(Pragmatics)

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Introduction

pragmatics is 'the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters'. In other words, pragmatics is concerned not with language as a system or product, but rather with the interrelationship between language form, (communicated) messages and language users.

Pragmatic meaning

It is often (though not universally) assumed that the task of 'semantics' is to describe and explain linguistic meaning (that is, what a given utterance means by virtue of the words used and the ways in which they are put together), whereas 'pragmatics' is concerned with the study of the meaning that linguistic expressions receive in use. So one task of pragmatics is to explain how participants in a dialogue move from the decontextualized (that is, linguistically encoded) meanings of the words and phrases to a grasp of their meaning in context. This process can involve several aspects:

- The assignment of reference.
- Figuring out what is communicated directly.
- Figuring out what is communicated indirectly, or implicitly.

Assigning reference

A listener needs to assign reference to the words that a speaker uses, and since there is no direct relationship between entities and words, the listener typically has to make inferences as to what the speaker intends to identify. If this inferencing process is too difficult, communication will falter and so, to be cooperative, a speaker needs to anticipate how much information the listener will need.

Reference is not simply a relationship between the meaning of a word or phrase and an object or person in the world. It is a social act, in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identify an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended.

Figuring out what is communicated directly

Sometimes the process of identifying pragmatic meaning involves interpreting ambiguous and vague linguistic expressions in order to establish which concepts and thoughts they express. For example, (Nice one) This could be taken to mean that a particular previously mentioned thing is nice, but this expression also has another conventionalized meaning, roughly: 'Good idea' or 'Well done'. This gap is filled by the addressee's reasoning about what the communicator (may have) intended to communicate by his or her utterance.

Figuring out what is communicated indirectly

The main import of an utterance may, in fact, easily lie not with the thought expressed by the utterance (that is, with what is communicated directly) but rather with the thought(s) that the hearer assumes the speaker intends to suggest or hint at. More technically, it lies with what is implicated, or communicated indirectly.

By far the most influential solution to this problem was developed in the mid-1960s by the Oxford philosopher Paul Grice (1989). He argued that people are disposed to presume that communicative behaviour is guided by a set of principles and norms, which he called the 'Co-operative Principle' and maxims of conversation.

The Co-operative Principle: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Grice labelled the maxims using terms which are, perhaps, less intuitive: 'quality', 'quantity', 'relation' and 'manner', respectively.

Grice's theory has limitations, such as neglecting social and interpersonal factors that affect communication preferences and goals. Additionally, it fails to address the crucial role of context in determining the meaning of an utterance, lacking a comprehensive explanation of pragmatic aspects in direct communication.

Cognitive approaches to pragmatics, like 'relevance theory,' argue that communication is guided by a single principle – **the principle of relevance**. This theory suggests that human cognition is designed for seeking valuable information, making traditional principles like the Co- operative Principle and maxims redundant. Communicative acts, such as utterances and texts, signal to recipients that the information provided is worth their attention, aiming to deliver valuable content without unnecessary mental effort.

Explaining the impact of social factors

Grice's theory of conversation emphasizes the role of norms in communicative interaction, while Relevance theory argues that social factors shaping communication are effectively analyzed within the context. It emphasizes understanding the assumptions participants use in producing and interpreting acts of communication. Leech suggests that language use involves a 'pragmalinguistic' and a 'sociopragmatic' perspective, with the former focusing on linguistic strategies used to convey a given pragmatic meaning, and the latter on socially-based assessments, beliefs, and interactional principles that underlie people's choice of strategies.

For example, a dinner guest might want to reach the salt placed at the other side of the table, and the sociopragmatic perspective focuses on the social judgements associated with such a scenario, such as the relationship between participants and the social acceptability of reaching for food. The pragmalinguistic perspective focuses on the linguistic strategies used to operationalize the request. Brown and Levinson's 'face' model of politeness emphasizes the impact of social factors on language use, defining face as the public self-image individuals seek to claim. The model distinguishes between positive face, linked to the desire for approval, and negative face, related to personal rights and freedom from imposition.

Brown and Levinson argue that speakers take three main variables into account when deciding how to word a face-threatening utterance such as a request or a challenge:

- The power differential between hearer and the speaker (that is, amount of equality/inequality, labelled P).
- The distance–closeness between them (labelled D).
- The degree of imposition of the content of the utterance (confusingly labelled R for rank).

They maintain that, other things being equal, the greater the power differential, the greater the distance and the greater the imposition, the more careful and more indirect the speaker will be.

Conversational patterns and structure

The role of context

In all approaches to pragmatics, context plays a major role in the communication process, and so an important task for pragmatic theory is to elucidate this process. In social pragmatics, it is widely accepted that the following features of the situational context have a particularly crucial influence on people's use of language:

- The participants: their roles, the amount of power differential (if any) between them, the degree of distance–closeness between them, the number of people present.
- The message content: how 'costly' or 'beneficial' the message is to the hearer and/or speaker, how face-threatening it is, whether it exceeds or stays within the rights and obligations of the relationship.
- The communicative activity (such as a job interview, a lecture, or a medical consultation): how the norms of the activity influence language behaviour such as right to talk or ask questions, discourse structure and level of formality.

Pragmatics research: paradigms and methods

There are two broad approaches to pragmatics, a cognitive– psychological approach and a social–psychological approach. Cognitive pragmaticists are concerned with fundamental questions such as: What is communication? and How is communication possible? They are primarily interested in exploring the relation between the decontextualized, linguistic meaning of utterances, what speakers mean by their utterances on given occasions and how listeners interpret those utterances on those given occasions. Social pragmaticists, on the other hand, tend to focus on the ways in which particular communicative exchanges between individuals are embedded in and constrained by social, cultural and other contextual factors.

In terms of data collection, pragmatics borrows from other sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology, and thus uses a variety of methods. For example, it uses video/audio-recording and detailed field notes to collect on-line discourse, such as authentic conversations, elicited conversations and role-played interactions; and it uses questionnaires, diaries and interviews to obtain off-line pragmatic data in which participants report, discuss and/or comment on their use of language.

Pragmatics and language learning and teaching

Pragmatics is crucial in learning and teaching a second or foreign language because communication involves more than linguistic knowledge. While grammatical proficiency is essential, it falls short in conveying the full message of an utterance. Pragmatics explores the intricate connection between linguistic meaning and contextual interpretation, making it essential for effective language acquisition and instruction.

The possibility (or likelihood) of pragmatic transfer

People tend to learn new things based on their existing knowledge, and this applies to second language acquisition, where the characteristics of their first language can influence how they use the second language. Teachers should be aware of the potential for pragmatic transfer, especially in aspects like accents.

Languages exhibit pragmatic differences, including grammatical differences like the use of singular or plural deictics in phrases such as "In the light of this" or "Having said that." Additionally, social variations are observed, such as the contrasting cultural expectations in China, where thanking a close friend might be seen as distancing, versus in England, where failure to express gratitude may be considered inappropriate.