

Pragmatics : A new Outlook of language.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper introduces the subject of pragmatics in language studies. Using illustrations from different interactions in institutional and personal contexts, it explains some basic concepts and principles relevant to pragmatic theory and the discipline. Pragmatics is defined in language studies as the outlook of language which accounts for the conditions of production and interpretation of language by human beings in social contexts of communication. The concepts and principles explained include context, knowledge structures, the cooperative principle and conversational maxims, politeness maxims, Speech acts, Presupposition. The discussion focuses on how these terms are relevant for interpreting utterances in diverse cognitive, social and cultural contexts of human communication.

Introduction

The first to make use of the term pragmatics was Charles Morris. He was not so much interested in establishing a new term (more the less a new field of inquiry), but in putting some order in what was, in his view, a generalized theory of signs: semiotics. Within this theory, according to the link they study, branches of inquiry could be divided into what later was to be called *Morris's Trichotomy*: syntax (who studies the relations between linguistic entities), semantics (who studies the relations between words and the world) and pragmatics (who studies "the relation of signs to interpreters). Carnap seems to have been especially influenced by the trichotomy when he wrote his *Introduction to Semantics* (1938).

The term 'pragmatics' originates from philosophical studies, but it has been widely used in several disciplines, both scientific and humanistic. In many tertiary institutions around the world, pragmatics is taught as a course in linguistic studies in

various departments of linguistics and language (both foreign and indigenous). As a course in linguistics, pragmatics is related to language studies and its relevance to interpretation of utterances of language is explored. Pragmatics is studied as part of semantics, if the latter is concerned within the wider consideration of meaning as linguistic meaning plus contextual meaning. But if semantics is conceived in the narrow sense of linguistic meaning alone, then pragmatics will complement semantics to cater for the remaining contextual aspect of meaning. From a theoretical angle, Mey (2001) identifies two viewpoints of pragmatic studies: the 'component' and 'perspective' viewpoints. In the first viewpoint, pragmatics accounts for the functions of language at the level of context, which complements semantics, whereas the semantic level incorporates the study of phonological, syntactic and lexical meaning. The outlook viewpoint emphasizes the pragmatic aspects of all parts of linguistics, including psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and other 'hyphenated' areas. Thus, Verschueren (1999) describes pragmatics as "a cognitive, social and cultural outlook on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour". Meanwhile, Mey (2001:9) argues that both viewpoints can complement each other; thus, we could have a pragmatic component, understood as the set of whatever pragmatic functions can be assigned to language, along with a pragmatic outlook which describes how these functions operate. We could ask how users 'mean what they say', that is how they communicate, using language, or how they 'say what they mean', employing the linguistic devices at their disposal to express themselves. The importance of pragmatics to language studies is that it enables scholars and students to understand the principles and procedures guiding the interpretation of socio-cultural and contextual meanings of utterances. Pragmatic methods are needed if we want a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behaviour: outside pragmatics, there can be no understanding of utterances. In the discussion below, we describe certain terms, principles and procedures of the pragmatics of language while exemplifying the discussion with some English utterances.

The Concept of Pragmatics

The scope of pragmatics as an area of language studies is a wide one. According to Levinson (1983) because its scope covers both context dependent aspects of language structure, and principle of language usage and understanding that have little to do with linguistic structure, it may be difficult to forge a definition that will cover both of these aspects. Despite this, however, scholars in the area generally explain that pragmatics accounts for the specific meanings of utterances in particular social and situational contexts, In particular, Leech and Short (1981:290) write:

"The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered."

Areas of interest

- The study of the speaker's meaning, not focusing on the phonetic or grammatical form of an utterance, but instead on what the speaker's intentions and beliefs are.
- The study of the meaning in context, and the influence that a given context can have on the message. It requires knowledge of the speaker's identities, and the place and time of the utterance.
- The study of implicatures, i.e. the things that are communicated even though they are not explicitly expressed.
- The study of relative distance, both social and physical, between speakers in order to understand what determines the choice of what is said and what is not said.
- The study of what is not meant, as opposed to the intended meaning, i.e. that which is unsaid and unintended, or unintentional.

- Information Structure, the study of how utterances are marked in order to efficiently manage the common ground of referred entities between speaker and hearer
- Formal Pragmatics, the study of those aspects of meaning and use, for which context of use is an important factor, by using the methods and goals of formal semantics.

Some Concepts of Pragmatic

The aim of pragmatic theory is to explain how it is that speakers of any language can use the sentences of that language to convey messages which do not bear any necessary relation to the linguistic content of the sentence used (Kempson 1977). Pragmatics studies generally assume that participants in a discourse do not rely only on their knowledge of language system in their interactions. Instead, they require a combination of the knowledge of language system and the knowledge of the culture and factors of situation in which communication takes place. It is the concern of pragmatics to make explicit some of the processes and procedures by which the participants activate relevant aspects of all these kinds of knowledge in communicative interaction. The discussion below will examine some of the basic concepts of pragmatics under the following subheadings: Presupposition, Conversational Implicature, deixis, cooperative principle, politeness maxims, speech acts -

1) Presupposition:

In the branch of linguistics known as [pragmatics](#), a presupposition is an implicit assumption about the world or background belief relating to an utterance whose truth is taken for granted in [discourse](#). Examples of presuppositions include:

- *Do you want to do it again?*
 - Presupposition: that you have done it already, at least once.
- *Jane no longer writes fiction.*
 - Presupposition: that Jane once wrote fiction.

A presupposition must be mutually known or assumed by the speaker and addressee for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context. It will generally remain a necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion, denial, or question, and can be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature (presupposition trigger) in the utterance.

2) Conversational Implicature:

Implicature is a technical term in the [pragmatics](#) subfield of [linguistics](#), coined by [H. P. Grice](#), which refers to what is *suggested* in an utterance, even though not expressed nor *strictly implied* (that is, entailed by the utterance). For example, the sentence "*Mary had a baby and got married*" strongly suggests that Mary had the baby before the wedding, but the sentence would still be *strictly true* if Mary had her baby after she got married. Further, if we add the qualification "*—not necessarily in that order*" to the original sentence, then the implicature is *cancelled* even though the meaning of the original sentence is not altered.

Types of implicature

[Paul Grice](#) identified three types of general conversational implicature:

1. The speaker deliberately flouts a [conversational maxim](#) to convey an additional meaning not expressed literally.

For instance, a speaker responds to the question "How did you like the guest speaker?" with the following utterance:

Well, I'm sure he was speaking English.

If the speaker is assumed to be following the [cooperative principle](#), in spite of flouting the [Maxim of Quantity](#), then the [utterance](#) must have an additional nonliteral meaning, such as: "The content of the speaker's speech was confusing."

2. The speaker's desire to fulfil two conflicting maxims results in his or her flouting one maxim to invoke the other. For instance, a speaker responds to the question "Where is John?" with the following utterance:

He's either in the cafeteria or in his office.

In this case, the Maxim of Quantity and the [Maxim of Quality](#) are in conflict. A cooperative speaker does not want to be ambiguous but also does not want to give false information by giving a specific answer in spite of his uncertainty. By flouting the Maxim of Quantity, the speaker invokes the Maxim of Quality, leading to the implicature that the speaker does not have the evidence to give a specific location where he believes John is.

3. The speaker invokes a maxim as a basis for interpreting the utterance. In the following exchange:

Do you know where I can get some gas? *There's a gas station around the corner.*

The second speaker invokes the [Maxim of Relevance](#), resulting in the implicature that "the gas station is open and one can probably get gas there"

3) Co-operative Principles

In social science generally and linguistics specifically, the cooperative principle describes how people interact with one another. As phrased by Paul Grice, who introduced it, it states, "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." Though phrased as a prescriptive command, the principle is intended as a description of how people normally behave in conversation.

The philosopher [Paul Grice](#) proposed four conversational maxims that arise from the [pragmatics](#) of natural [language](#). The Gricean Maxims are a way to explain the link between utterances and what is understood from them. The Maxims are based on his [cooperative principle](#), which states, '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,' and is so called because listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way. The principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situations and is further broken down into the four Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner.

4) Politeness Principles:

The politeness principles, like the cooperative principle, may be formulated as series of maxims which people assume are being followed in the utterance of others (Cook, 1989). As, with the cooperative principle, any flouting of these maxims will take on meanings, provided it is perceived for what it is. Several scholars have proposed maxims of politeness (Leech 1983, Thomas 1995, Yule 1996). Leech (1983) suggests five maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty and agreement. The statements of the maxims are as follows:

Tact: Minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to the other; maximize the expression of belief which imply benefit to other.

Generosity: Minimize the expression of benefit to self; maximize the expression of cost to self suggests a better expression of this as: Minimize the expression of cost to other; maximize the expression of benefit to other

Approbation: Minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of other.

Modesty: Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self.

Agreement: Minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and other.

5) Speech Act Theory:

Speech act is a technical term in linguistics and the philosophy of language. The contemporary use of the term goes back to John L. Austin's doctrine of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Many scholars identify 'speech acts' with illocutionary acts, rather than locutionary or perlocutionary acts. As with the notion of illocutionary acts, there are different opinions on the nature of speech acts. The extension of speech acts is commonly taken to include such acts as promising, ordering, greeting, warning, inviting someone and congratulating.

Locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts

Speech acts can be analysed on three levels: A locutionary act, the performance of an utterance: the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning, comprising phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts corresponding to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance; an illocutionary act: the semantic 'illocutionary force' of the utterance, thus its real, intended meaning (see below); and in certain cases a further perlocutionary act: its actual effect, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not (Austin 1962).

Functional Development in Communication

It is interesting to speculate, if one accepts the classification of macro functions, on the evolution of functions in each human individual. The crying baby is being expressive, although her cries are not really language at all but instinctive reactions to environment. When she realises that by controlling these cries, and producing them at will, rather than automatically, she can influence the behaviour of her parents, she has progressed to the directive function. Phatic communication begins very early. Chuckling, gurgling and babbling often have no function but to say: 'Here I am, and so are you' (Halliday 1975). The poetic function is also apparent at an early stage: when young children latch on to a phrase and repeat it endlessly, without conveying any information.

The referential function gains its prominence only at a later stage, and the metalinguistic function also comes later. These latter two are the functions on which a considerable amount of attention is lavished at school. Surprisingly, a good deal of foreign language teaching begins with the metalinguistic function, by explicitly stating the rules of grammar.

Conclusion

Pragmatics has been described in this study as an area of linguistics that is concerned with interpreting utterances by relating their meanings to the users and social situations. In such interpretations, the relevance of such basic concepts as knowledge of the world, conversational principles, speech acts, and functions of language has been recognised. Meanwhile, advances continue to be made in pragmatic theory, principles and the applications. Abundant information and details on these and more complex and controversial issues are available in current literature on the subject.

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