

Pragmatics

Pragmatics talks about the ways how speakers use language in concrete situations, in ways which cannot be predicted from linguistic knowledge alone. It deals with general rules followed by people when they communicate with one another. **Discourse analysis** also talks about various devices used by speakers or writers when they make single sentences. These two disciplines overlap.

There are four rules or 'maxims' of conversation. An American philosopher Paul Grice discovered them. They reveal that when we speak, we tend to be helpful to one another and cooperative.

1 **Maxim of Quantity**. The rule wants us to give the right amount of information when we talk.

2 **Maxim of Quality**. The rule wants us to be truthful. E.g. if you know it is Tuesday, you will not say to the partner, "*It's Wednesday.*"

3 **Maxim of Relevance**. The rule wants us to give a reply that fits the question. Following is not relevant for example: *Are you a student?* Answer: *I like cherries.*

4 **Maxim of Manner**. The rule wants us to be clear and orderly. We should describe things in the order, in which they occurred. E.g.: *Break one egg, put it into the bowl and add some sugar.* You won't say *put an egg into the bowl, add some sugar and break the egg.*

All four maxims can be summarized as a **cooperative principle**. It seems like common sense but if you listen to people speaking you would discover how often they break the principle. Anyway, the principles are fairly vague and conclusions which can be made are wide and numerous.

Utterances behave somewhat like actions. E.g. if you say '*Come in, please!*', you want to achieve some effect. In the case mentioned above you want somebody to walk in, to act. Even if we say '*Roses are red.*', it can be regarded as an action. It is an act of making a statement: *I state that roses are red.* This approach is known as **speech act theory**. This is another way enabling linguists to classify the ways in which people use language. Thanks to this theory we can divide the statements into two groups: Direct and indirect speech acts:

Direct speech acts can be represented mostly by questions, commands and statements:

E.g. *It's hot inside.* (I state.)

When does the lesson start? (I ask you.)

Get back! (I command you.)

Indirect speech acts do not say the idea so openly.

E.g. *Isn't it past your bedtime?*

You should have been in bed long ago.

The syntactic structure of both kinds of speech acts can be the same. That is why the only way that helps us to distinguish, which speech act is intended, is to specify the conditions under which it would be appropriate to interpret something as a particular type of speech act.

Another feature helping us to understand how people understand one another are **frames**.

E.g.: '*Long grey curtain is the latest fashion, madam.*'

I've got brown armchairs.'

The salesman understands because they both have a similar outline sitting-room frame. Knowledge might be stored in the form of stereotypical situations, or frames. Both speakers in

this conversation have a certain amount of mutual knowledge. They both have a similar outline, frame.

Now let's compare the two accounts of George's meal below:

A George ate the curry with delight. Curry had always been George's favourite food. The curry was subtly flavoured. George detected hints of cumin and coriander in the curry. Cumin and coriander are George's favourite spices.

B George ate the curry with delight. This type of food had always been his favourite. The dish was subtly flavoured, and in it he detected hints of his favourite spices, cumin and coriander.

From Jean Aitchison: Linguistics, CUP 1994, p.97-8

Both written texts are more or less the same. Anyway both of them use various devices for putting together words and sentences together into a cohesive whole. The word *curry* in A has been replaced in B by alternative words *this type of food/ the dish, it*. *George* has been replaced by *he*. The word order has been changed in some places and some of the sentences have been joined together. The first version appears to have been written without any attention to the overall effect. The second is stylistically better, more normal sounding. The second is a cohesive whole thanks to various devices mentioned above that link the sentences together.

Discourse analysis is the study that deals with this topic. It overlaps with stylistics (the study of linguistics and literature). Putting things together in the utterance into a cohesive whole is something that native speakers do automatically. People learning the foreign language usually have to be taught this skill.

Hardly ever people use monologues when they want to communicate. They take it in turns to talk. It is a social ritual partially prescribed by convention. Sometimes the utterances occur in predictable pairs. They are known as **adjacency pairs** or exchanges:

E.g.: *What's the time?*

It's half past eight.

How are you?

I'm fine, thanks.

I'm terribly sorry.

Please don't mention it.

Triple utterances may also occur:

What's the time?

It's half past three.

Thanks.

Exchanges are selected from a number of commonly used types and they have a predictable format.

It happens that people cannot express their ideas smoothly sometimes, or they make mistakes when speaking. These things have to be repaired. **Repairs** also help us to understand better how humans use the language. There are three kinds of repairs:

Self-repair. A speaker him/her/self notices the problem and tends to repair it.

E.g.: *Could you pass me the salt, please? The pepper, that is.*

I'll be back in an hour - sorry, I mean two hours.

Other-repair. Someone is not sure about what has been said or detects a mistake.

E.g.: *I assume you mean the pepper.*

Other-initiated self-repair. A listener mildly indicates the mistake to the speaker, who then repairs his utterance.

E.g.: *Brenda has started to attend an English course.*

Brenda? Has she really?

Sorry, I don't mean Brenda, I mean Betty.

People tend to be polite to one another. Politeness can affect the structure of conversation and be a source of repairs.

Politeness plays an important role when people speak. Let's compare the following sentences:

Shut the window!

I wonder if you'd mind shutting the window?

There's quite a draught in here.

The first sentence seems to be rather rude. We would probably use the other two. Avoidance of directness is partly culturally based. Just partially as some features seem to be universal. In spite of the fact that each culture has its own preferred strategies, people everywhere tend to be polite in similar ways as there are two basic social requirements: *No criticism* and *No interference*. Both of them would be a social risk.