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Definitions and background

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). It has, consequently, more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. *Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning.*

This type of study necessarily involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said. It requires a consideration of how speakers organize what they want to say in accordance with who they're talking to, where, when, and under what circumstances. *Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning.*

This approach also necessarily explores how listeners can make inferences about what is said in order to arrive at an interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning. This type of study explores how a great deal of what is unsaid is recognized as part of what is communicated. We might say that it is the investigation of invisible meaning. *Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said.*

This perspective then raises the question of what determines the choice between the said and the unsaid. The basic answer is tied to the notion of distance. Closeness, whether it is physical, social, or conceptual, implies shared experience. On the assumption of how close or distant the listener is, speakers determine how much needs to be said. *Pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance.*

These are the four areas that pragmatics is concerned with. To understand how it got to be that way, we have to briefly review its relationship with other areas of linguistic analysis.

Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics

One traditional distinction in language analysis contrasts pragmatics with syntax and semantics. **Syntax** is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms, how they are arranged in sequence, and which sequences are well-formed. This type of study generally takes place without considering any world of reference or any user of the forms. **Semantics** is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world; that is, how words literally connect to things. Semantic analysis also attempts to establish the relationships between verbal descriptions and states of affairs in the world as accurate (true) or not, regardless of who produces that description.

Pragmatics is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms. In this three-part distinction, only pragmatics allows humans into the analysis. The advantage of studying language via pragmatics is that one can talk about people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (for example, requests) that they are performing when they speak. The big disadvantage is that all these very human concepts are extremely difficult to analyze in a consistent and objective way. Two friends having a conversation may imply some things and infer some others without providing any clear linguistic evidence that we can point to as the explicit source of 'the meaning' of what was communicated. Example [1] is just such a problematic case. I heard the speakers, I knew what they said, but I had no idea what was communicated.

[1] Her: So—did you?
Him: Hey—who wouldn't?

Thus, pragmatics is appealing because it's about how people make sense of each other linguistically, but it can be a frustrating area of study because it requires us to make sense of people and what they have in mind.

Regularity

Luckily, people tend to behave in fairly regular ways when it comes to using language. Some of that regularity derives from the fact that people are members of social groups and follow general patterns of behavior expected within the group. Within a familiar social group, we normally find it easy to be polite and say appropriate things. In a new, unfamiliar social setting, we are often unsure about what to say and worry that we might say the wrong thing.

When I first lived in Saudi Arabia, I tended to answer questions in Arabic about my health (the equivalent of 'How are you?') with the equivalent of my familiar routine responses of 'Okay' or 'Fine'. However, I eventually noticed that when I asked a similar question, people generally answered with a phrase that had the literal meaning of 'Praise to God'. I soon learned to use the new expression, wanting to be pragmatically appropriate in that context. My first type of answer wasn't 'wrong' (my vocabulary and pronunciation weren't inaccurate), but it did convey the meaning that I was a social outsider who answered in an unexpected way. In other words, more was being communicated than was being said. Initially I did not know that: I had learned some linguistic forms in the language without learning the pragmatics of how those forms are used in a regular pattern by social insiders.

Another source of regularity in language use derives from the fact that most people within a linguistic community have similar basic experiences of the world and share a lot of non-linguistic knowledge. Let's say that, in the middle of a conversation, I mention the information in [2].

[2] I found an old bicycle lying on the ground. The chain was rusted and the tires were flat.

You are unlikely to ask why a chain and some tires were suddenly being mentioned. I can normally assume that you will make the inference that if X is a bicycle, then X has a chain and tires (and many other regular parts). Because of this type of assumption, it would be pragmatically odd for me to have expressed [2] as [3].

[3] I found an old bicycle. A bicycle has a chain. The chain was rusted. A bicycle also has tires. The tires were flat.

You would perhaps think that more was being communicated than was being said and that you were being treated as someone with no basic knowledge (i.e. as stupid). Once again, nothing in

the use of the linguistic forms is inaccurate, but getting the pragmatics wrong might be offensive.

The types of regularities just described are extremely simple examples of language in use which are largely ignored by most linguistic analyses. To understand why it has become the province of pragmatics to investigate these, and many other, aspects of ordinary language in use, we need to take a brief historical look at how things got to be the way they are.

The pragmatics wastebasket

For a long period in the study of language, there has been a very strong interest in formal systems of analysis, often derived from mathematics and logic. The emphasis has been on discovering some of the abstract principles that lie at the very core of language. By placing the investigation of the abstract, potentially universal, features of language in the center of their work tables, linguists and philosophers of language tended to push any notes they had on everyday language use to the edges. As the tables got crowded, many of those notes on ordinary language in use began to be knocked off and ended up in the wastebasket. That overflowing wastebasket has become the source of much of what will be discussed in the following pages. It is worth remembering that the contents of that wastebasket were not originally organized under a single category. They were defined negatively, as the stuff that wasn't easily handled within the formal systems of analysis. Consequently, in order to understand some of the material that we're going to pull out of the wastebasket, we really have to look at how it got there.

The tables upon which many linguists and philosophers of language worked were devoted to the analysis of language structure. Consider the sentence in [4].

[4] The duck ran up to Mary and licked her.

A syntactic approach to this sentence would be concerned with the rules that determine the correct structure and exclude any incorrect orderings such as *'Up duck Mary to the ran'. Syntactic analysis would also be required to show that there is a missing element ('and _ licked her') before the verb 'licked' and to explicate the rules that allow that empty slot, or accept the pronoun 'it' in that position. However, those working on syntax would have thought it totally irrelevant if you tried to say that ducks don't do that and maybe the speaker had meant to say 'dog'. Indeed, from a purely syntactic perspective, a sentence like 'The bottle of ketchup ran up to Mary' is just as well-formed as [4].

Over on the semantics side of the table, however, there would have been concern. An entity labelled 'duck' has a meaning feature (animate) whereas a 'bottle of ketchup' would be (non-animate). Since a verb like 'ran up to' requires something animate as its subject, the word 'duck' is okay, but not a 'bottle of ketchup'.

Semantics is also concerned with the truth-conditions of propositions expressed in sentences. These propositions generally correspond to the basic literal meaning of a simple clause and are conventionally represented by the letters p, q, and r. Let's say that the underlying meaning relationship being expressed in 'The duck ran up to Mary' is the proposition p, and in 'the duck licked Mary', it is the proposition q. These two propositions are joined by the logical connector symbol for conjunction, & (called 'ampersand'). Thus, the propositional representation of the sentence in [4] is as in [5].

[5] $p \,\&\, q$

If p is true and q is true, then $p \,\&\, q$ is true. If either p or q is not true (i.e. false), then the conjunction of $p \,\&\, q$ is necessarily false. This type of analysis is used extensively in formal semantics.

Unfortunately, in this type of analysis, whenever $p \,\&\, q$ is true, it logically follows that $q \,\&\, p$ is true. Notice that $q \,\&\, p$, in this particular case, would have to be expressed as in [6].

[6] The duck licked Mary and ran up to her.

In the everyday world of language use, this state of affairs is not identical to the original situation described in [4]. There is a sequence of two events being described and we expect that sequence, in terms of occurrence, to be reflected in the order of mention.

If p involves some action and q involves another action, we have an overwhelming tendency to interpret the conjunction

'and', not as logical &, but as the sequential expression 'and then'. This is another example of more being communicated than is said. We might propose that there is a regular principle of language use which can be stated as in [7].

[7] Interpret order of mention as a reflection of order of occurrence.

What is expressed in [7] is not a rule of syntax or semantics. It isn't a rule at all. It is a pragmatic principle which we frequently use to make sense of what we hear and read, but which we can ignore if it doesn't apply in some situations.

There are many other principles of this type which will be explored in the following chapters. In Chapter 2, we will start with a really simple principle: the more two speakers have in common, the less language they'll need to use to identify familiar things. This principle accounts for the frequent use of words like 'this' and 'that' to refer to things in a shared physical context (for example, 'Would you like this or that?'). Exploring this basic aspect of language in use is the study of deixis.

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Deixis and distance

Deixis is a technical term (from Greek) for one of the most basic things we do with utterances. It means 'pointing' via language. Any linguistic form used to accomplish this 'pointing' is called a **deictic expression**. When you notice a strange object and ask, 'What's that?', you are using a deictic expression ('that') to indicate something in the immediate context. Deictic expressions are also sometimes called **indexicals**. They are among the first forms to be spoken by very young children and can be used to indicate people via **person deixis** ('me', 'you'), or location via **spatial deixis** ('here', 'there'), or time via **temporal deixis** ('now', 'then'). All these expressions depend, for their interpretation, on the speaker and hearer sharing the same context. Indeed, deictic expressions have their most basic uses in face-to-face spoken interaction where utterances such as [1] are easily understood by the people present, but may need a translation for someone not right there.

[1] I'll put this here.

(Of course, you understood that Jim was telling Anne that he was about to put an extra house key in one of the kitchen drawers.)

Deixis is clearly a form of referring that is tied to the speaker's context, with the most basic distinction between deictic expressions being 'near speaker' versus 'away from speaker'. In English, the 'near speaker', or **proximal** terms, are 'this', 'here', 'now'. The 'away from speaker', or **distal** terms, are 'that', 'there', 'then'. Proximal terms are typically interpreted in terms of the speaker's location, or the **deictic center**, so that 'now' is generally understood as referring to some point or period in time that has the time of the speaker's utterance at its center. Distal terms can simply