What is Pragmatics?

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What is pragmatics?

- Pragmatics is concerned with the interpretation of linguistic meaning in context.
  1. The abstract meaning: the dictionary meaning; *Son of a bitch*
  2. The contextual meaning: the meaning in discourse; an undesirable man.
  3. The force (illocutionary force): speaker’s intention; to insult a person.

What is pragmatics?

It's cold in here!

It's all right if I close the window?

What is pragmatics?

"Son of a bitch"

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2. The contextual meaning: the meaning in discourse; an undesirable man.
3. The force (illocutionary force): speaker’s intention; to insult a person.

What is pragmatics?

See smoke, fine. Set fire, punish.

(From a TV serial "Everybody Loves Raymond")

Debra: Your parents seem nice.
Raymond: Yeah, they seem nice.

Student: Teacher, can we not do homework today?
Teacher: It’s the last day, and you still ask me not to give you homework! Well, if you don’t want to do homework, don’t do it.

Speaker Meaning

Example 2

(From a TV serial "Everybody Loves Raymond")

Debra: Your parents seem nice.
Raymond: Yeah, they seem nice.

Example 3

Student: Teacher, can we not do homework today?
Teacher: It’s the last day, and you still ask me not to give you homework! Well, if you don’t want to do homework, don’t do it.

Analysis

- **Utterance Meaning:** the speaker says what he really means; the meaning is expressed explicitly.
- **Force:** the speaker means more than what he is actually saying; more information is conveyed than the semantic meaning of the utterance.
- What is actually expressed by words is different from the actual meaning of the utterance.
Lecture overview
- Historical origin
- Definition of pragmatics
- Correlation of pragmatics with other disciplines: humanities and social science; and semantics

1. Historical Origin
- Charles Morris (1903 – 1979)
- Was concerned with the study of the science of signs, which he called semiotic;
- Distinguished 3 branches of semiotics: syntactics (or syntax), which studies the formal relation among different signs; semantics, the study of the relation between the signs and the objects they denote; and pragmatics, the study of the relation of signs to their interpreters, i.e. people.

Definition of Pragmatics: the importance of being a user

Pragmatics
Deal with description of language use; (Performance)
Doing things with words
The force (Speaker's intention)

Traditional Linguistics
Deal with description of the structure (Competence)

Speaker

Listener

Hearer Collaboration
- Almost all speech acts are necessarily collaborative in nature (the collaboration of the hearer is necessary in order for the speech act to 'succeed').

A is trying to watch television. His daughter, B, is reading on the settee:
A1: Do you want to change places?
B1: I'm O.K.
A2: I can't see the television.
B2: Can't you?
A3: Get off the settee!

Various Definitions of Pragmatics

Definition 1
- Pragmatics is the study of relations between language and context.

Example 4
She is 65 years old. But she went a bit funny after her husband died.
I have funny feet.

Funny:
- causing amusement, laughter;
- difficult to explain or understand; strange;
- slightly unwell;
- slightly insane, eccentric.

Context: What is it?
Here are four subareas involved in fleshing out what we mean by context.
- physical context
- epistemic context
- linguistic context
- social context
**Context: What is it?**

- **Physical context:** we can think of this in terms of where the conversation is taking place, what objects are present, what actions are occurring, and so forth.

- **Epistemic context:** the epistemic context refers to what speakers know about the world. For example, what background knowledge is shared by the speakers is crucially part of your epistemic knowledge when you have a conversation with someone else.

**Linguistic Context --- Assigning reference in context**

- And just think, if he hadn’t fallen out of bed, I’d never have found out about it!
- Do you know who he referred to? You don’t if you are unable to assign reference to he.

**Reference:** the who or what which is being referred to in context.

**Pragmatics & Contextual Knowledge**

- Two people come into a library and they are talking really loud. They sit at your table and continue their babbling. So, you look up at them and say:

> "Excuse me, could you please speak up a bit more? I missed what you said."

- What do we know pragmatically about your utterance? What contributes to our understanding of why its literal meaning (i.e. please speak up) departs so much from what its intended meaning is (i.e. shut up!)?

**Pragmatics & Contextual Knowledge**

- Contextual knowledge allows for the hearer to comprehend that the intended meaning is distinct from the literal meaning.

- Pragmatics is one of the subareas in linguistics. How does it different from others?
Various Definitions of Pragmatics

Definition 2 (by cognitive pragmaticsists)
- Pragmatics is the study of how receivers of messages interpret utterances.

Definition 3 (socio-psychological pragmatics)
- Pragmatics is the study of the speaker’s meaning: what does the producer of the message mean, why does he choose to express his idea in a certain way.
- Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.

Delimitation: How does Pragmatics correlate with other disciplines?

- Leech distinguishes between three possible ways of structuring this relationship:
  - Semanticism (Searle)
  - Complementarism (Leech, Levinson)
  - Pragmaticism (Austin)

Pragmatics/semantics: both disciplines study meaning

Delimitation: Component vs. perspective

- Component
  - Ever since Chomsky’s works and maintained faithfully by his followers, the view that the grammar of a language consists of several ‘components’ has been very popular. Pragmatics is one of the many components in the linguistic pie.

- Perspective
  - Verschueren (1999: 7): pragmatics does not constitute an additional component of a theory of language, but it offers a different perspective.

How does Pragmatics differ from other subareas?

Linguistics

- Semantics
- Syntax
- Socio-linguistics
- Pragmatics
- Language Therapy
- Language Acquisition

A very good example to illustrate the discrepancies between pragmatics and other areas in linguistics is to see how various approaches deal with a sentence like “天氣好熱啊.”

- Grammarians’ approach: how words in this sentence are formed in line with specific rules.
- Syntacticians’ point of view: how these words are related to one another.
- Semanticists’ approach: spelling out the natural, static or stable meanings of this sentence.
- Pragmatics: associate this sentence with the “who when where and what is meant for by the speaker” issue.
Pragmatics vs. sociolinguistics

- Sociolinguistics is mainly concerned with the systematic linguistic correlates of relatively fixed and stable social variables on the way an individual speaks. (region of origin, social class, ethnicity, sex, age, etc.)
- Sociolinguistics tells us what linguistic resources the individual has.

- Pragmatics is mainly concerned with describing the linguistic correlates of relatively changeable features of that same individual and the way in which the speaker exploits his/her (socio) linguistic repertoire in order to achieve a particular goal.
- Pragmatics tells us what the language user does with the language.

Sociolinguistics

Example 1

F: Our Jen done that.
M: How many coats did you put on it, Jen?
J: How many what?
M: Coats.
J: Oh, quite a lot.
F: And'ow about the waistcoats and socks?
M: Oh, she didn’t bother with those.
F: She’m lazy.

From working class and not highly educated.
Elderly, uses old-fashioned word instead of ‘vest’.
Came from the West Country, use of the regional form ‘she’m’.

Pragmatics

Example 1

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The use of the intimate address and reference form.
Uses linguistic strategies to disrupt a serious conversation and turn it into a joke.

Assigning Sense in Context

Assigning the correct or intended sense to polysemous or homonymous lexical items can be especially problematic for non-native speakers of a language, because they may lack the cultural background knowledge on which native speakers draw.

- funny
- 数目/樹木
- 樹脂/樹枝

What is a sense?

- Sense refers to the meaning of a word, also refers to how we see an object or the amount of information given about an object.
- Some words exist without sense, such as the proper name (with reference but without sense). Some words may have more than one senses.

The evening star
Venus
The morning star
What is a reference?

Definition: Reference is the concrete object or concept that is designated by a word or expression.

Example:
Historically, there was only one person called George Washington, the first president of the United States. He can be referred to in a text in many ways, such as:
- the president
- Mr. Washington
- he, or even
- my friend.

Even though there are many ways to talk about him, there is only one reference in the referential realm.

Assigning Reference in Context

In order to understand an utterance, we not only have to assign sense to words, but also to assign reference (i.e. to determine in context who or what is being referred to).

- And just think, if he hadn’t fallen out of bed, I’d never have found out about it!

Expressions such as this, that, and it are called deictic expressions (indexical expressions). They usually derive part of their meaning from their context of utterance.

Deixis

- The relation between language and context is observed in the phenomenon of deixis;
- A Greek word: “pointing”, “indicating”;
- Term borrowed from philosophy: Charles Peirce
- Syn.: indexical expressions, indexicals;
- Traditional categories of deixis: **person, place and time.**

Deictic Expression

- Place deictics: concerns the location of places relative to the location of the speaker and the hearer, such as here, there, this, that...
- Time deictics: concerns the relation of the time of the utterance with other temporal points which are important for understanding of the utterance, such as yesterday, tomorrow...
- Person deictics: Shows what role the speaker and the hearer play in the speech event in which the utterance is delivered, such as I, you, he...
- Discourse deictics: concerns the usage of deictic expressions which refer to some portion of discourse that contains that utterance the former, the latter, the above, the following...

Ambiguity

- **Structural ambiguity** arises when one phrase or sentence has more than one meaning due to the fact that it can be interpreted into different structures.
- I shot an elephant in my pajamas.
- **Lexical ambiguity** arises when at least one word in a phrase has more than one meaning.
- I will meet you by the bank.
Ambiguity

- I shot an elephant in my pajamas.
- Possibly, there are two interpretations:
  - [The elephant], I shot in my pajamas.
  - [The elephant in my pajamas], I shot.


--Groucho Marx, Animal Crackers

Lexical ambiguity:
- I'll meet you by the bank.

Structural ambiguity:
- 大型傢俱 拍賣會

The ambiguity is a result of different structures.

Components of Speaker Meaning

- There are two components of speaker meaning:
  1. Utterance meaning (contextual meaning)  “What is said”
  2. Force  “What is meant”

Importance of Utterance Meaning

- If we take sentences out of context, most of them are potentially multiply ambiguous. However, in real life we rarely have difficulty in interpreting them correctly in context.
- But, problems really do occur in assigning sense and reference and there are cases where correctly assigning sense and reference can be a matter of life and death.
  - See the example on page 17.

Ambiguity and Intentionality

- In general, only one utterance meaning is intended by the speaker, but there are exceptions.
- Example

  The word spring is used twice in the third stanza: the first time with reference to a part of a rifle, the second time with reference to the season of the year. In the fourth stanza the word spring carries both meanings at the same time.
Importance of Utterance Meaning

- It is generally true that law courts exhibit an extreme reluctance to take account of anything other than the dictionary meaning of particular expression.
  - Example: The legislator 涂月霞 was accused of insulting another legislator intentionally in public by calling her “老處女”

Force of Speaker Meaning

- In pragmatics we use the term force to refer to the speaker’s communicative intention.
- Force is the term introduced by the philosopher, J. L. Austin.
- A same utterance may have different pragmatic forces, depending on in what context it occurs.
  - Example: Is that your car?
    - Is the speaker expressing admiration or scorn?
    - A complaint that your car is blocking the drive?
    - Is the speaker requesting a lift into town?

Understanding Utterance Meaning But Not Force

- To understand both utterance meaning and force is probably the most common state of affairs in communication. The second most common situation is when we understand the meaning of a speaker’s utterance, but not the force.
  - Example: 泡茶

Understanding Force But Not Utterance Meaning

- To understand the force of what is said without understanding the meaning of that utterance is rather unusual. It usually occurs when the listener is a non-native speaker.
  - Example: the force of bowing

Why do we need pragmatics?

- General answer:
  - Pragmatics is needed if we want a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior.

A: I just met the old Irishman and his son, coming out of the toilet.
B: I wouldn’t have thought there was room for the two of them.
A: No silly, I mean I was coming out of the toilet. They were waiting.