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What is Pragmatics

Introduction

Within the tradition of British analytical philosophy, the 1960s saw the very successful birth of another new interdisciplinary subject, namely pragmatics. Based on the work of **Austin (1962)** on *How to Do Things with Words*, it is especially the study of **John Searle (1969)** on *speech acts* and an influential essay of **H. P. Grice (1975)** on *conversational maxims* that sparked a flow of studies on language use extending the traditional focus on syntax and semantics with a pragmatic component, accounting for **the illocutive functions of language in terms of speech acts, implicatures and other aspects of contextually based language use**. More generally, Pragmatics has become the discipline that houses many of the studies of language use beyond grammar, such as the influential work on *politeness* by *Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (Brown & Levinson, 1987)*.

Pragmatics is concerned with our understanding of language in context. Two kinds of contexts are relevant. The first is **linguistic context**—the discourse that precedes the phrase or sentence to be interpreted; the second is **situational context**—virtually everything nonlinguistic in the environment of the speaker.

Speakers know how to combine words and phrases to form sentences, and they also know how to combine sentences into a larger discourse to express complex thoughts and ideas. **Discourse analysis** is concerned with the broad speech units comprising multiple sentences. It involves questions of **style, appropriateness, cohesiveness, rhetorical force, topic/subtopic structure**, differences between **written and spoken discourse**, as well as **grammatical properties**.

Within a discourse, preceding sentences affect the meaning of sentences that follow them in various ways. *For example, the reference or meaning of pronouns often depends on prior discourse*. Prior discourse can also disambiguate words like **bank** in that the discussion may be about rafting on a river or interest rates. **Situational context**, on the other hand, is the **nonlinguistic environment** in which a sentence or discourse happens. It is the context that allows speakers to seamlessly, even unknowingly, interpret questions like **Can you pass the salt?** *as requests to carry out a certain action and not a simple question*.

Situational context includes the speaker, hearer, and any third parties present, along with their beliefs and their beliefs about what the others believe. It includes the physical environment, the social milieu, the subject of conversation, the time of day, and so on, ad infinitum. Almost any imaginable extralinguistic factor may, under appropriate circumstances, influence the way language is interpreted.

Pronouns provide a good way to illustrate the two kinds of contexts—linguistic and situational—that affect meaning. **Meaning is called its antecedent. Pronouns are sensitive to syntax, discourse, and situational context for their interpretation.** We'll take up syntactic matters first.

I- Pronouns and Syntax

There are different types of pronouns. Reflexive pronouns are pronouns such as himself and themselves. In English, reflexive pronouns always depend on an NP antecedent for their meaning and the antecedent must be in the same clause, as illustrated in the following examples:

1. Jane bit herself.
2. *Jane said that the boy bit herself.
3. *Herself left.

In (1) the NP Jane and the reflexive pronoun herself are in the same S; in (2) herself is in the embedded sentence and is structurally too far from the antecedent Jane, resulting in the ungrammaticality. In (3) herself has no antecedent at all, hence nothing to get its meaning from.

Languages also have pronouns that are not reflexive, such as he, she, it, us, him, her, you, and so on, which we will simply refer to as pronouns. Pronouns also depend on other elements for their meaning, but the syntactic conditions on pronouns are different from those on reflexives. Pronouns cannot refer to an antecedent in the same clause, but they are free to refer to an NP outside this clause, as illustrated in the following sentences (the underlining indicates the interpretation in which the pronoun takes the NP (in this case, John) as antecedent):

4. *John knows him.
5. John knows that he is a genius.

The sentence in (4) is ungrammatical relative to the interpretation because him cannot mean John. (Compare John knows himself.) In (5), however, the pronoun he can be interpreted as John. Notice that in both sentences it is possible for the pronouns to refer to some other person not mentioned in the sentence (e.g., Pete or Harry). In this case the pronoun gets its reference from the larger discourse or nonlinguistic context.

II- Pronouns and Discourse

Let's consider this excerpt:

The 911 operator, trying to get a description of the gunman, asked, "What kind of clothes does he have on?" Mr. Morawski, thinking the question pertained to Mr. McClure [the victim, who lay dying of a gunshot wound], answered, "He has a bloody shirt with blue jeans, purple striped shirt." The 911 operator then gave police that description [the victim's] of a gunman. THE NEWS AND OBSERVER, Raleigh, North Carolina, January 21, 198.

Pronouns may be used to refer to entities previously mentioned in discourse or to entities that are presumably known to the participants of a discourse. When that presumption fails, miscommunication such as the one at the head of this section may result.

In a discourse, prior linguistic context plays a primary role in pronoun interpretation. In the following discourse:

- It seems that the man loves the woman.
- Many people think he loves her.

the most natural interpretation of *her* is "the woman" referred to in the first sentence, whoever she happens to be. But it is also possible for *her* to refer to a different person, perhaps one indicated with a pointing gesture. In such a case *her* would be spoken with added emphasis:

- Many people think he loves *her*!

Similar remarks apply to the reference of *he*, which most naturally refers to the man, but not necessarily so. Again, intonation and emphasis would provide clues.

Referring to the previous discourse, strictly speaking, it would not be ungrammatical if the discourse went this way:

- It seems that the man loves the woman.
- Many people think the man loves the woman.

However, most of us would find that the discourse sounds stilted. Often in discourse, the use of pronouns is a stylistic decision, which is part of pragmatic.

III- Pronouns and Situational Context

When a pronoun gets its reference from an NP antecedent in the same sentence, we say that the pronoun is bound to that noun phrase antecedent. If her in

1. Mary thinks he loves her

refers to “Mary,” it would be a bound pronoun. Pronouns can also be bound to quantifier antecedents such as “every N” as in the sentence:

2. **Every** girl in the class hopes John will ask her out on a date.

In this case *her* refers to each one of the girls in the class and is said to be bound to every girl. Reflexive pronouns are always bound. When a pronoun refers to some entity outside the sentence or not explicitly mentioned in the discourse, it is said to be free or unbound. So, *her* in the sentences in (1) and (2) need not be bound to Mary or to every girl and can also refer to some arbitrary girl. The reference of a free pronoun must ultimately be determined by the situational context.

First- and second-person nonreflexive (*I/we, you*) pronouns are bound to the speaker and hearer, respectively. They therefore depend on the situational context, namely, who is talking and who is listening. With third-person pronouns, semantic rules permit them either to be bound or free, as noted above. The ultimate interpretation in any event is context-dependent.

IV- Deixis

In all languages, the reference of certain words and expressions relies entirely on the situational context of the utterance and can only be understood in light of these circumstances. This aspect of pragmatics is called deixis (pronounced “dike-sis”). Pronouns are deictic. Their reference (or lack of same) is ultimately context dependent. Expressions such as

this person,
that man,

these women
those children

are also deictic, because they require situational information for the listener to make a referential connection and understand what is meant. These examples illustrate person deixis. They also show that the demonstrative articles like *this* and *that* are deictic.

We also have **time deixis** and **place deixis**. The following examples are all **deictic expressions of time**:

now	then	tomorrow
this time	that time	seven days ago
last week	next April.	Two weeks from now

To understand what specific times such expressions, refer to, we need to know when the utterance was said. Clearly, next week has a different reference when uttered today than a month from today. If you

found an undated notice announcing a “BIG SALE NEXT WEEK,” you would not know whether the sale had already taken place.

Expressions of **place deixis** require contextual information about the place of the utterance, as shown by the following examples:

here	there	this place
that place	this ranch	those towers over there
this city	these parks	yonder mountains

Additionally, Directional terms such as **before/behind left/right front/back** are deictic insofar as you need to know the orientation in space of the conversational participants to know their reference. In Japanese the verb *kuru* “come” can only be used for motion toward the place of utterance. A Japanese speaker cannot call up a friend and ask

- **May I *kuru* to your house?**

as you might, in English, ask “**May I come to your house?**” The correct verb is ***iku***, “go,” which indicates motion away from the place of utterance. In Japanese these verbs have a deictic aspect to their meaning.

Deixis, as we’ve seen, is a great source of humor. A cartoon shows a chicken calling across the road to another chicken,

- “Hey, how do I cross to the other side of the road?”
- “You’re ON the other side,” the other chicken replies.

Deixis abounds in language use and marks one of the boundaries of semantics and pragmatics. Deictic expressions such as ***as I, an hour from now, and behind me*** have meaning to the extent that their referents are determined in a regular way as a function of the situation of use. (I, for example, picks out the speaker.) To complete their meaning, to determine their reference, it is necessary to know the situational context.

V- More on Situational Context

Depending on inflection, ***ah bon*** [in French] can express *shock, disbelief, indifference, irritation, or joy*. PETER MAYLE, *Toujours Provence*, 1991

Much discourse is **telegraphic**. Verb phrases are not specifically mentioned, entire clauses are left out, direct objects vanish, pronouns roam freely. Yet people still understand one another, and part of the reason is that rules of grammar and rules of discourse combine with **contextual knowledge** to fill in what’s missing and make the discourse cohere. Much of the contextual knowledge is knowledge of who is speaking, who is listening, what objects are being discussed, and general facts about the world we live in—what we have been calling situational context.

Often what we say is not literally what we mean. When we ask at the dinner table if someone “can pass the salt” we are not querying their ability to do so, we are requesting that they do so. If I say “You’re standing on my foot,” I am not making idle conversation; I am asking you to stand elsewhere. We say “It’s cold in here” to convey “Shut the window,” or “Turn up the heat,” or “Let’s leave,” or a dozen other things that depend on the real-world situation at the time of speaking.

In the following sections, we will look at several ways that real-world context influences and interacts with meaning.

VI- Maxims of Conversation

Polonius: Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, c. 1600

Speakers recognize when a series of sentences “hangs together” or when it is disjointed. The following discourse (*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II), which gave rise to Polonius’s remark, does not seem quite right—it is not coherent.

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet: Words, words, words.
Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?
Hamlet: Between who?
Polonius: I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.
Hamlet: Slanders, sir: for the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams: all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for yourself, sir, should grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.

Hamlet, who is feigning insanity, refuses to answer Polonius’s questions “in good faith.” He has violated certain conversational conventions, or maxims of conversation. These maxims were first discussed by the British philosopher H. Paul Grice and are sometimes called Gricean Maxims. One such maxim, the maxim of quantity, states that a speaker’s contribution to the discourse should be as informative as is required—neither more nor less. Hamlet has violated this maxim in both directions. In answering “Words, words, words” to the question of what he is reading, he is providing too little information. His final remark goes to the other extreme in providing too much information.

Hamlet also violates the maxim of relevance when he “misinterprets” the question about the reading matter as a matter between two individuals.

The run-on nature of Hamlet’s final remark, a violation of the maxim of manner, is another source of incoherence. This effect is increased in the final sentence by the somewhat bizarre metaphor that compares growing younger with walking backward, a violation of the maxim of quality, which requires sincerity and truthfulness.

Here is a summary of the four conversational maxims, parts of the broad cooperative principle:

Name of Maxim	Description of Maxim
Quantity	Say neither more nor less than the discourse requires
Relevance	Be relevant
Manner	Be brief and orderly; avoid ambiguity and obscurity
Quality	Do not lie; do not make unsupported claims.

Unless speakers (like Hamlet) are being deliberately uncooperative, they adhere to these maxims and to other conversational principles and assume others do too.

Bereft of context, if one man says (truthfully) to another “I have never slept with your wife,” that would be provocative because the very topic of conversation should be unnecessary, a violation of the maxim of quantity. Asking an able-bodied person at the dinner table “Can you pass the salt?”, if answered literally, would force the responder into stating the obvious, also a violation of the maxim of quantity. To avoid this, the person asked seeks a reason for the question, and deduces that the asker would like to have the salt shaker.

The maxim of relevance explains how saying “It’s cold in here” to a person standing by an open window might be interpreted as a request to close it, or else why make the remark to that person in the first place?

For sentences like **I am sorry that the team lost to be relevant**, it must be true that “the team lost.” Else why say it? Situations that must exist for utterances to be appropriate are called presuppositions. Questions like **Have you stopped hugging your border collie?** Presuppose that you hugged your border collie, and statements like **The river Avon runs through Stratford** presuppose the existence of the river and the town. The presuppositions prevent violations of the maxim of relevance. When presuppositions are ignored, we get the confusion in this passage from *Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

“Take some more tea,” the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly. “I’ve had nothing yet,” Alice replied in an offended tone, “so I can’t take more.”

“You mean you can’t take less,” said the Hatter: “It’s very easy to take more than nothing.”

Utterances like **Take some more tea** or **Have another beer** carry the presupposition that one has already had some. The March Hare is oblivious to this aspect of language, of which the annoyed Alice is keenly aware.

Presuppositions are different from entailments in that they are felicity conditions taken for granted by speakers adhering to the **cooperative principle**. Unlike entailments, they remain when the sentence is negated. **I am not sorry that the team lost** still presupposes that the team lost. On the other hand, while **John killed Bill** entails Bill died, no such entailment follows from **John did not kill Bill**.

Conversational conventions such as these allow the various sentence meanings to be sensibly combined into discourse meaning and integrated with context, much as rules of sentence grammar allow word meanings to be sensibly (and grammatically) combined into sentence meaning.

VII- Implicatures

What does “yet” mean, after all? “I haven’t seen Reservoir Dogs yet.” What does that mean? It means you’re going to go, doesn’t it? NICK HORNBY, High Fidelity, 199

In conversation we sometimes infer or conclude based not only on what was said, but also on assumptions about what the speaker is trying to achieve. In the examples just discussed—It’s cold in here, Can you please pass the salt, and I have never slept with your wife—the person spoken to derives a meaning that is not the literal meaning of the sentences. In the first case he assumes that he is being asked to close the window; in the second case he knows he’s not being questioned but rather asked to pass the salt; and in the third case he will understand exactly the opposite of what is said, namely that the speaker has slept with his wife.

Such inferences are known as implicatures. Implicatures are deductions that are not made strictly on the basis of the content expressed in the discourse. Rather, they are made in accordance with the conversational maxims, taking into account both the linguistic meaning of the utterance as well as the particular circumstances in which the utterance is made.

Consider the following conversation:

SPEAKER A: Smith does not have any girlfriends these days.

SPEAKER B: He’s been driving over to the West End a lot lately.

The implicature is that Smith has a girlfriend in the West End. The reasoning is that B's answer would be irrelevant unless it contributed information related to A's question. We assume speakers try to be cooperative. So it is fair to conclude that B uttered the second sentence because the reason that Smith drives to the West End is that he has a girlfriend there.

Because implicatures are derived on the basis of assumptions about the speaker that might turn out to be wrong, they can be easily cancelled. For this reason A could have responded as follows:

SPEAKER A: He goes to the West End to visit his mother who is ill.

Although B's utterance implies that the reason Smith goes to the West End is to visit his girlfriend, A's response cancels this implicature.

Implicatures are different than entailments. An entailment cannot be cancelled; it is logically necessary. Implicatures are also different than presuppositions. They are the possible consequences of utterances in their context, whereas presuppositions are situations that must exist for utterances to be appropriate in context, in other words, to obey Grice's Maxims. Further world knowledge may cancel an implicature, but the utterances that led to it remain sensible and wellformed, whereas further world knowledge that negates a presupposition—oh, the team didn't lose after all—renders the entire utterance inappropriate and in violation of Grice's Maxims.

VIII- Speech Acts

You can use language to do things. You can use language to make promises, lay bets, issue warnings, christen boats, place names in nomination, offer congratulations, or swear testimony. The theory of speech acts describes how this is done.

By saying I warn you that there is a sheepdog in the closet, you not only say something, you warn someone. Verbs like bet, promise, warn, and so on are performative verbs. Using them in a sentence (in the first person, present tense) adds something extra over and above the statement.

There are hundreds of performative verbs in every language. The following sentences illustrate their usage:

I bet you five dollars the Yankees win.

I challenge you to a match.

I dare you to step over this line.

I fine you \$100 for possession of oregano.

I move that we adjourn.

I nominate Batman for mayor of Gotham City.

I promise to improve.

I resign!

I pronounce you husband and wife.

In all of these sentences, the speaker is the subject (i.e., the sentences are in first person), who by uttering the sentence is accomplishing some additional action, such as daring, nominating, or resigning. In addition, all of these sentences are affirmative, declarative, and in the present tense. They are typical performative sentences.

An informal test to see whether a sentence contains a performative verb is to begin it with the words I hereby. . . . Only performative sentences sound right when begun this way. Compare I hereby apologize to you with the somewhat strange I hereby know you. The first is generally taken as an act of apologizing. In all of the examples given, insertion of hereby would be acceptable.

In studying speech acts, the importance of context is evident. In some situations Band practice, my house, 6 to 8 is a reminder, but the same sentence may be a warning in a different context. We call this underlying purpose of the utterance—be it a reminder, a warning, a promise, a threat, or whatever—the illocutionary force of a speech act. Because the illocutionary force of a speech act depends on the context of the utterance, speech act theory is a part of pragmatics.

Conclusion

Knowing a language means knowing how to produce and understand the meaning of infinitely many sentences. The study of linguistic meaning is called semantics. Lexical semantics is concerned with the meanings of morphemes and words; compositional semantics with phrases and sentences. The study of how context affects meaning is called pragmatics.

Speakers' knowledge of sentence meaning includes knowing the truth conditions of declarative sentences; knowing when one sentence entails another sentence; knowing when two sentences are paraphrases or contradictory; knowing when a sentence is a tautology, contradiction, or paradox; and knowing when sentences are ambiguous, among other things. Compositional semantics is the building up of phrasal or sentence meaning from the meaning of smaller units by means of semantic rules.

There are cases when the meaning of larger units does not follow from the meaning of its parts. Anomaly is when the pieces do not fit sensibly together, as in colorless green ideas sleep furiously; metaphors are sentences that appear to be anomalous, but to which a meaningful concept can be attached, such as time is money; idioms are fixed expressions whose meaning is not compositional but rather must be learned as a whole unit, such as kick the bucket meaning "to die."

Part of the meaning of words may be the association with the objects the words refer to (if any), called reference, but often there is additional meaning.