

Pragmatics: language in context

Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context dependent on the intentions of participants in a conversational exchange.

Not the meaning of single words as we saw in semantics, but the intended meaning of whole exchanges.

Context , **intentions** and **shared knowledge** are the keywords. Also **cultural implications** play an important role.

A.: I have a 14 year old son

B.: Well that's right

A.: I also have a dog

B.: Oh, I'm sorry

Can you understand the meaning of this exchange?

It would be hard to catch it, unless you know that A. is trying to rent an apartment from B. and B. doesn't accept pets.

If we don't have a context or some knowledge about a situation, the meaning can be 'invisible' as in the previous example. Or

- have you seen Sam?

- the black car is over there.

This seemingly incoherent text can be easily understood if we know that Sam owns a black car.

Here are some real examples of promotional signs:

- 1) We do not tear your clothing with machinery; we do it carefully by hand.
- 2) Heated attendant parking
- 3) Baby & Toddler Sale

They may sound ambiguous:

- 1) Does not mean that people working at that laundry tear your clothing by hand.
- 2) Does not mean that we heat an attendant and then we can park him/her somewhere.
- 3) Does not mean that we sell young children.

What do they mean?

Context

We have different 'contexts':

The **linguistic context** also called **co-text** is the set of other words used in the same sentence:

We know that the word 'pupil' is a homonym. How do we know which meaning is intended? Usually by means of the linguistic context:

If it is used in a sentence with words like 'teacher', 'classmates' etc. we understand that pupil here means ?

If it is used in a sentence with words like 'eye', 'dilatation' or 'iris' we know that here it means ?

Context

Another type, is the **physical context**.

If you see a sign like this near a school: SLOW
DOWN. PUPILS CROSSING THE STREET.

It does not mean that you have to slow down
because you could run over eye-pupils and
reduce them to a pulp.

Deixis

There are many words in the language that cannot be interpreted alone, without being put in a context.

Here, there, that, now, I, you, them and many other examples if used without a shared knowledge or a clear context can result very vague.

You'll have to bring them back by tomorrow, because they aren't here now and they need them.

This sentence could virtually mean everything and nothing.

Deixis comes from Greek and it means 'pointing' by means of language.

We can have: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis.

Doing things with language

This means that language is used to act. By means of language, in terms of requests, commands, asking questions or information, we perform actions, that are called 'speech acts'.

'are you married?', 'can they play tennis?', 'do you know anything about what happened?' are forms used to ask for information and they are called 'direct speech acts'.

In questions like 'Can you pass the wine?' you don't want to know if the person is able to pass the wine, but you want the wine. These are called 'indirect speech acts'.

What are the functions here?

Did you watch the movie?

IS A QUESTION

Drink your milk

IS A COMMAND/REQUEST

You drank your milk

IS A STATEMENT

Whenever one of the above forms is used to perform a function other than the functions written below, the result is an indirect speech act.

If we say: *you left the door open* this could be interpreted as a statement, but if you say that to someone who has just come into the room and it is quite cold outside, yours is not a statement but a request: please, shut the door.

WHEN WE FAIL TO UNDERSTAND SOMEONE'S SPEECH ACTS THE RESULT COULD BE FUNNY:

A: excuse me, do you know the time?

B: yes, I do.

And B walks away.

J. L. Austin in his 'How to do things with words' identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and calls these the 'locutionary', the 'illocutionary' and the 'perlocutionary' act, respectively.

Suppose, for example, that a bartender utters the words, 'The bar will be closed in five minutes'

He is performing the locutionary act of saying that the bar will be closed in five minutes (from the time of utterance).

The level here is 'what words mean' and the act of saying something

In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the customers of the bar's imminent closing.

The level here is to perform a function: informing people about something.

Perlocutionary acts are performed with the intention of producing a further effect. The bartender intends to be performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the customers to believe that the bar is about to close and making them finish their drink or order their last one.

The level here is to making people do something.

He is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words.

To sum up:

- *Locutionary act*: saying something (the locution).
- *Illocutionary act*: the *performance* of an act in saying something
The *illocutionary force* is the speaker's intent.
e.g. informing, ordering, warning, asking.
- *Perlocutionary acts*: Speech acts that have an effect on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the listener. In other words, they seek to change minds!

Unlike locutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are external to the performance.
e.g., inspiring, persuading or deterring.

YOU SAY, YOU DO, YOU OBTAIN

Pragmatics and speech acts in culture

Speech acts are sometimes difficult to perform in a second language because learners may not know the idiomatic expressions or cultural norms in the second language or they may transfer their first language rules and conventions into the second language, assuming that such rules are universal.

The natural tendency for language learners is to fall back on what they know to be appropriate in their first language.

For example, the following remark as uttered by a native English speaker could easily be misinterpreted by a hearer who does not know English very well:

- **Sarah:** "I can't agree with you more. "
- **Marie:** "Hmmm...." (Thinking: "She can't agree with me?! I thought she liked my idea!")

Culture again

Knowing a language is not enough.

If we ignore the culture of a people we could get into pragmatic troubles.

The communication could break down.

- Would you like something to drink?
- No, thanks.

This is why many times in order to respect the pragmatic force of utterances for instance in movies the translation of these utterances must be changed because they would not have the same effect on audiences other than the source culture's.

From *Ocean's Eleven* by Steven Soderbergh, 2001.

Rusty-Brad Pitt and Danny-George Clooney meet and start joking on the way in which they are dressed. Danny is wearing a tuxedo, while Rusty is wearing a dress with a very showy shirt.

In the original version we have:

- Rusty: *I hoped you were the groom.*
- Danny: *Ted Nugent called. He wants his shirt back.*

Can you understand this exchange? Who's Ted Nugent?

He is a famous US rock singer who uses to wear very eccentric clothes. OK, but who knows that?

Another example from the same film:

The gang is organizing a difficult theft in a Las Vegas casino.

- Rusty: *You'd need at least a dozen guys doing a combination of jobs.*
- Daniel: *What do you think?*
- Rusty: *Off the top of my head, I say looking at a Bowski, a Jim Brown, two Jethro's and a Leon Spinx, not to mention the biggest Ella Fitzgerald ever...*

????????????????????

Ignoring, as we do, many of the mentioned people, what would the effect be if we had a literal translation?

The meaning is that they need some kinds of superheroes, geniuses in their fields.

For example, Spinx is a famous boxer who won the world championship against Mohamed Ali.

"I'm expecting a phone call" can have a variety of meanings. It could be a request to leave the phone line free or a reason for not being able to leave the house; or it could suggest to a listener who already has background information that a specific person is about to call to convey good or bad news.

Exercises

Exercise 1

Imagine suitable contexts for the following sentences:

- Take a holiday soon.
- It won't end here.
- You're taking this too seriously.
- I deny all knowledge of this scandal.
- Don't tell Mom!

Exercise 2

Below are some examples of **indirect speech acts**. For each one try to identify both the direct and the indirect act, e.g.

[Customer at a railway ticket-office window]
I'd like a day return to Galway.

Direct act: *statement* Indirect act: *request*

- [Travel agent to customer]
Why not think about Spain for this summer?
- [Customer to barman]
I'll have the usual.
- [Mother to child coming in from school]
I bet you're hungry.
- [Doorman at a nightclub to aspiring entrant]
Don't make me laugh.

Specify two possible illocutionary and perlocutionary forces for each of the following and create a suitable situation/context

- Are you drunk?
- I can't hear a word.
- I had a flat tyre
- Can you hear me?
- It is seven o'clock
- It is getting quite late.
- It is raining outside.
- Your bed is not done.
- Enjoy yourself!
- good luck!
- I see no dictionaries here.

Our path:

Phoneme

Morpheme

Word / meaning

Clause

Sentence/utterance

Pragmatics

Discourse

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is the study of units of language, larger than clause or sentence, used by members of a speech community in order to meaningfully communicate.

Discourse analysis deals with both speech and writing and the concepts of **pragmatics**, **text**, **textuality** and **genre** are its central elements.

The definition offered by *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Crystal, 1992) says: discourse analysis is

- the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc.
- how the choices of articles, pronouns, and tenses affects the structures of the discourse
- the relationship between utterances in a discourse
- the moves made by speakers to introduce a new topic, change the topic, or insert a higher role relationship to the other participants
- Analysis of spoken discourse is sometimes called *conversational analysis* (CA). Some linguists use the term *text linguistics* for the study of written discourse.

Discourse vs. pragmatics

Pragmatics is traditionally mentioned in contrast with semantics, and primarily concerned with language in use.

In modern linguistics, pragmatics is applied to the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choice they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication

Discourse Analysis is specifically about the understanding and examination of spoken or written language in actual communication.

Pragmatics is a fundamental tool to analyse discourse.

But discourse is something 'larger', it deals with the concepts of text, textuality and genre as we saw at the beginning.

You have 5 mins. to provide a definition of 'text':

Texts may refer to collections of written or spoken material...

The study of texts has become a defining feature of a branch of linguistics referred to as *textlinguistics or discourse analysis*.

Texts are seen as language units which have a definable communicative function, characterized by such principles as **cohesion, coherence and informativeness (or informativity)**

On the basis of these principles, texts are classified into **text types** and **genres**.

THIS MAKES TEXTUALITY

Text types and genres

- **Text types** can be categorised in:
 - narrative texts;
 - descriptive texts;
 - expository texts;
 - argumentative texts;
 - directive texts;
- **Genres** can be fictional (in general novels, poems, in particular adventure, detective, horror, love stories) or non-fictional (essays, scientific or technical reports, articles, biographies, advertising, recipes ecc.).

Narrative and descriptive texts

Narrative texts have to do with time. What is characteristic is the passing, the sequencing of time events.

There is the use of dynamic verbs and adverbials such as, *and, then, first, second, lastly* and many others...

Example: *First we went to the airport, then we had a coffee and after the check-in we caught the plane.*

Descriptive texts are concerned with the setting of people and things in space.

State/stative/static verbs and usually adjectives are used.

In descriptions there is no passing of time.

Example: The room was quite large with mirrors everywhere, but the strange was that those mirrors were all veiled with black and thick curtains.

Expository and directive texts

Expository texts identify and characterise phenomena.

Dictionary definitions, teacher's explications, summaries, and essays.

Example: *texts may consist of one or more words and of one or more sentences. Texts can be both written and spoken.*

Directive texts are those texts which contain directives, commands, instructions, rules etc.

Usually imperatives are used.

Example: *shake well before using. Do not ingest with alcohol. Take two teaspoonfuls before lunch.*

Argumentative texts

Argumentative texts start from the assumption that the receiver's beliefs must change.

Someone must be persuaded about something.

There is a starting hypothesis, the support of this hypothesis with examples and pieces of evidence and then a conclusion which should convince the audience.

Advertisements, essays, pieces of advice, recommendations parents/children, political discourse (before elections) etc.

Example: *you'll lose weight in less than a week with these fantastic pants. Five kilos a week!!! Buy now because there are only ten pairs left.*

To simplify:

GENRES

Recipe

=

Biology textbook

=

Novel

=

Tourist material

=

Instruction booklet

=

TEXT TYPES

Directive text

Expository or descriptive text

Narrative or descriptive text

Expository , descriptive text

Directive text

Important to remember:

Two or more texts may belong to the same text type even though they may come from two or more different genres.

A brochure for tourists, a novel, a scientific article are different in genre, but they may belong to the same text type (ex. descriptive)

Register and style

Register (in *stylistics* and *sociolinguistics*) refers a variety of language defined according to its use in social situations, e.g. a register of scientific, religious, formal English (Crystal).

Style in linguistics is generally defined as *a typical and distinctive way of using a language*.

DO THEY HAVE THE SAME MEANING???

STYLE is to do with variations in formality

STYLE has been divided into categories. Some of them are:

- CASUAL

Coming down the pub?

- INFORMAL

Would you like to go to the pub?

- FORMAL

You are cordially invited to accompany me to the pub.

- FROZEN/FIXED

PLEASE ORDER PUB LUNCHESES AT THE FOOD COUNTER.

ADAPTED FROM:

<http://www.esoeonline.org/main-index/index-teachers/stylevsregister.htm>

Style can also be modern, classical, old-fashioned, original, inimitable, distinctive, obscure, foggy, elegant, redundant

There are a couple of related concepts which may be helpful:

- **STYLISTIC VARIATION** which describes the differences in speech and writing of a group of users of a language dependent on situation, location, topic and roles.
- **STYLE SHIFT** which describes what you do when you add, for example, a personal note to the end of a formal piece of language because, although there is a convention operating which makes you want to be formal, you have a closer personal relationship with one or more of the addressees. So we get, e.g., "Good morning ladies and gentlemen and thank you for coming. Oh, and Hi to you too, Sue."

Style can affect three things, essentially:

- Choice of Vocabulary ('dismayed' vs. 'fed up').
- Choice of Grammatical Structure ('John is responsible.' vs. 'The responsibility lies with John.')
- Pronunciation

REGISTER should refer to the differences in language use which are shown up when you analyse the speech and writing between people of the same occupation or sharing a field of interest. So we might have:

- LAWYERS

Endorse the affidavit.

- DOCTORS

Diagnose with the stethoscope.

- EFL TEACHERS

Fill in the gaps in the Cloze test.

Cohesion and coherence

Sentences are linked by **lexical** and **grammatical** items.

Cohesion refers to the surface structure of texts, on how words and sentences are organised to form a cohesive whole.

Coherence refers to deeper structures (**not** surface structures) in texts. It involves a semantic (meaning) and pragmatic level.

Difference between cohesion and coherence

Hoey sums up the difference between cohesion and coherence as follows:

"We will assume that cohesion is a property of the text and that coherence is a facet [i.e. side] of the reader's evaluation of a text. In other words, cohesion is objective, capable in principle of automatic recognition, while coherence is subjective and judgments concerning it may vary from reader to reader."

Informativity

A text has to contain some new information. A text is informative if it transfers new information, or information that was unknown before. Informativity should be seen as a gradable phenomenon. The degree of informativity varies from participant to participant in the communicative event.

A book written in 1950 has an informativity that was high appropriate then.

Sentences like:

The sea is water

The days of the week are seven

The first letter of the alphabet is 'A'

can give new information to a baby, but they are not informative at all for the rest of the world.

Read the following and discuss them in terms of cohesion and coherence:

- My father once bought a Lincoln. He did it by saving every penny he could. That car would be worth a fortune today. However, he sold it to help pay for my college education. Sometimes, I think I'd rather have the Lincoln;
- My father bought a Lincoln. The car driven by the police was red. Red doesn't suit her. She wrote three letters. However, a letter isn't as fast as an e-mail message and, you know, my mailing box is full of spam.

Here are the titles of two short texts you are going to read and analyse:

*Wastewater disinfection treatments and
A Haunted House.*

Can you identify the topic of each text? What types and genre of text do you think they belong to?

Here are two extracts from the texts.

Read through them as quickly as you can (not more than 2 minutes) and try to think of their differences in terms of syntax and lexis (in particular pay attention to the use of verb tenses, passive forms, special or technical lexis, denotation, connotation and any other aspects coming to your mind).

A moment later the light had faded. Out in the garden then? But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened. He left it, left her, went North, went East, saw the stars turned in the Southern sky; sought the house, found it dropped beneath the Downs. "Safe, safe, safe," the pulse of the house beat gladly. "The Treasure yours."

The disinfection of potable water and wastewater provides a degree of protection from contact with pathogenic organisms including those causing cholera, polio, typhoid, hepatitis and a number of other bacterial, viral and parasitic diseases. Disinfection is a process where a significant percentage of pathogenic organisms are killed or controlled. As an individual pathogenic organism can be difficult to detect in a large volume of water or wastewater, disinfection efficacy is most often measured using "indicator organisms" that coexist in high quantities where pathogens are present