

## What is Pragmatics?

David Crystal defines pragmatics as the study of 'factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the affects of our choices on others' (Crystal 1987:120). This implies that merely knowing how to produce grammatically acceptable and meaningful sentences in a language is not in itself sufficient to use the language effectively in a given situation. So, for example, it is meaningful to say to your boss "Give me a 10% pay increase now!". However, if the intention is to actually get a pay increase, pragmatic factors (e.g. general knowledge about the power dynamics between employers and employees) would suggest an alternative choice of words as having more chance of achieving this goal.

So, there is a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics; the former concerns the meaning of *sentences* and the latter concerns the meaning of **utterances**. Utterances are affected by linguistic factors, such as pronunciation, intonation, stress and speed of delivery, and extra-linguistic factors, such as the **context** (the location and the time) the **medium** (on the telephone, face to face, etc.), the **speakers** (their relationship to each other, feeling for each other, education, etc.) and the **cotext** (what was said before the utterance and what is likely to come after the utterance).

Imagine I write down the sentence 'Yes, it is isn't it.' on a blank piece of paper, and I then drop it out of a speeding car in the middle of Hokkaido. If somebody finds the paper, what are they to make of it? The words on the page, although constituting a well-formed grammatical English sentence, have very limited meaning since there is no indication of the situation in which the words were written, no indication of who is writing to whom, what the question was that the sentence appears to be answering, and so on.

The above example shows that a sentence can be seen to have a clear structure and an abstract meaning (i.e. it is internally consistent but it is not directly related to the real world). Conversely, an utterance can be seen to have both a structure and a meaning, which is directly related to the real world.

### Intercultural Encounter

\* What can we understand about the relationship between these two men, given the context in which they are talking?

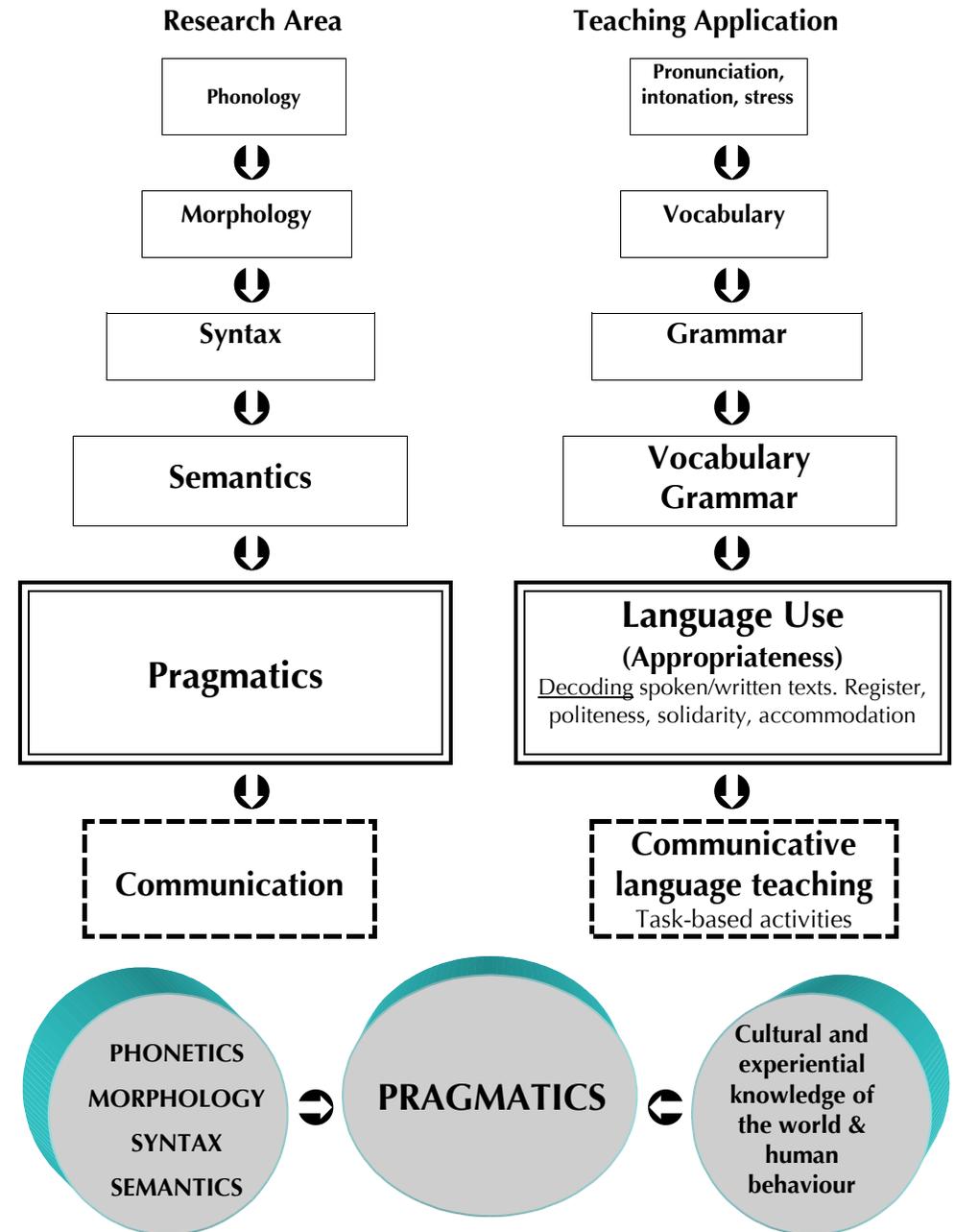
\* Why didn't the seated gentleman use a more formal expression when he addressed the standing man ?

\* What does their body language (their posture) say about their relationship?



All of these are pragmatic questions.

## Linguistics and Pragmatics



## What is the difference between discourse analysis and pragmatics?

Both DA and pragmatics have been used to cover a wide area of research into language in use. It is perhaps most helpful to think of pragmatics as one of the approaches used under the general umbrella of DA. The following approaches are often included under the general DA framework, covering both **written texts** and **spoken language**

Approach	Focus	Names	Emerges from
Conversation Analysis (CA)	Talk in interaction (turn-taking, sequence, repair, preference)	Harvey Sacks Emmanuel Schegloff	Sociology
Pragmatics & Speech act theory	Speaking as doing (utterances)	John Austin John Searle H Paul Grice Brown & Levinson	Philosophy of language
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	Language as a form of social practice - how social and political domination is reproduced by text and talk.	Norman Fairclough	Politics Sociology
Ethnography of speaking	Connecting language and ways of thinking	Dell Hymes, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf	Anthropology (Linguistics)
Variation analysis	Discovering patterns in language varieties by quantitative analysis	William Labov	Sociolinguistics

However, as we can see from the table, each of these approaches has its own unique history and focus. Therefore, proponents of one particular approach may not see themselves as being part of any overall 'family' of discourse analysis. Nevertheless the approaches needn't be seen as mutually exclusive, and researchers into discourse may choose their approach depending on what aspect of language or human interaction they are researching. It could also be argued that using a variety of approaches can give a richer understanding of the discourse.

## What is the difference between semantics and pragmatics – surely they are both connected with meaning aren't they?

**Semantics** considers how meaning is encoded in language through what the words and sentences refer to. So semantics is context neutral.

**Pragmatics** considers what speakers mean when they use the words they do, **not** what the code means. So it is context dependent.

## Key Concepts in Pragmatics

### John Austin ➔ *How to do things with words*

**Speech act** - When we say something we are always doing something.

**Performative utterances** - These only work in the first person and in the present tense (e.g. the actual words '*I apologize*' constitute the action of apologizing. Nothing more needs to be said or done to perform the act of apologizing) Therefore they can not be analyzed as being true or false => HOWEVER we can cast doubt on the status of such an utterance - does it meet all the certain conditions that are necessary to be considered as a real apology, its felicity conditions (e.g. is the speaker sincere?)

**Constative utterances** – These are not performative but proposition-making & therefore able to be analyzed as being true or false (e.g. 'I sing' can be said, even though I may not say it while I'm singing, so we can judge empirically whether it is true or not.)

**Locutionary act** – the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference

**Illocutionary act** – the force of the utterance. By uttering the sentence it becomes a statement, offer, promise, etc., by virtue of the conventional illocutionary force associated with it. The prototypical illocutionary act is a performative.

**Perlocutionary act** – the effect on the hearer (by uttering the words, the speaker brings about effects on the hearer, which are specific to the circumstances of the utterance)

Illocutionary acts have become synonymous with **speech acts**. So in fact every utterance performs an action through its illocutionary force (IF), even if the verb isn't a performative. The difference is that performatives make their IF explicit (*I order; I promise; I bet*).

### **BUT in utterances with non-performatives how do we know what the IF is?**

Utterances do not have an unlimited range of possible interpretations, but they usually have more than one. Our interpretation of the IF depends on the **context** (**Where** is it? **What** is happening around there?), the participants (**Who** are they? What is their relationship? Their **ends** – why are they talking to each other), the **medium** of communication, their **tone** of voice, their **nonverbal** behavior.

## John Searle ➡ Speech acts and Felicity Conditions

For a speech act to be carried out properly, a number of rules (felicity conditions) have to be fulfilled, and different speech acts require different conditions to be fulfilled. Searle gives us an example of rules that might be required to carry out an act of promising

Steve: *I'll do the dishes tonight!*

1. First, this is a **propositional act** – Steve asserts he will do some future act.
2. Second, there are **preparatory conditions** to be met, such as: that he intends to do the dishes; that he believes he will do it; and that he thinks the hearer wants him to do it.
3. Third, there are **sincerity conditions** which must be met: such as that Steve intends to put himself under an obligation by making the utterance; that both the speaker and the hearer understand the utterance; and that the situation is normal (e.g. not in a play or T.V. drama).
4. Fourth, the speech act has to be **executed** in the right way. (In this case, it is unlikely that any special procedure would be necessary, but in an English court of law a witness is often required to place one hand on a Bible or other holy book while promising to tell the truth, in order to make it legally binding.)
5. Finally, the utterance must contain an **essential condition**, which is recognizable as an act of promising - '*I'll do it*' is acceptable, whereas '*I might do it*' would not be. In this way S puts himself under an obligation to the hearer to do the dishes.

### However, Searle's framework has some problems:

- a. It puts emphasis on the speaker's state of mind (intention), which can never be determined in any objective or empirical way.
- b. Individuals and cultures are different, so just whose rules or norms of behavior should we refer to when coming up with any specific set of felicity conditions, and what happens when the speaker and hearer are from different cultures with different sets of expectations about the way things operate?

To deal with the question of cultural knowledge in the interpretation of speech acts an alternative framework was devised by H. Paul Grice. In particular he coined the term '**indirect speech act**'.

## H. Paul Grice ➡ The Cooperative Principle and Indirect Speech Acts

In any normal conversation there is a desire by the participants to cooperate to enable information to be passed quickly and smoothly between them. The participants therefore conform to particular rules of conversation, which Grice divides into four main Maxims as follows:

## The Four Maxims of Conversation

### A) Maxim of Quantity

- (i) The contribution should be as informative as is required.
- (ii) The contribution should not be more informative than is required.

### B) Maxim of Quality

- (i) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

### C) Maxim of Relation

- (i) Be relevant.

### D) Maxim of Manner

- (i) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- (ii) Avoid ambiguity.
- (iii) Be brief!
- (iv) Be orderly!

As both speaker and hearer are aware of these maxims, during an ideal conversation, the speaker would conform to them completely, and the hearer would have no problem in interpreting the utterances. However, as Grice noted, in an actual conversation the maxims are not always adhered to. Instead, they may be broken in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons:

#### a) They may be violated deliberately in order to mislead the hearer.

For example, if a British tourist in Kyoto asks me where *Kinkakuji* is and I reply '*It's near Kyoto Station, just behind the Shinkansen tracks*', then I am violating the first maxim of quality (I'm deliberately lying). However, the addressee has no way of knowing this as she would be expecting me to cooperate in the exchange.

#### b) They may be opted out of, indicating a refusal to cooperate in the conversation

For example, if a policeman asks a suspect where he was exactly at nine o'clock last night, and the suspect replies '*Mind your own business, copper!*', the suspect is opting out of the first maxim of quantity.

#### c) Two maxims may clash, so it is impossible to conform to one without breaking another

For example, if someone in Tokyo asks me what the weather is like in Osaka I might be able to have a good guess, but I could not conform to the first maxim of quantity without breaking the second maxim of quality.

#### d) Maxims may be flouted to make an **indirect speech act (conversational implicature)**.

**Example 1:** if it is raining heavily outside and I comment to my students '*Nice day again, isn't it?*' I am flouting the first maxim of quality, which demands that I tell the truth. However, as it is obvious to the students that it is not a nice day, and they know that this is equally obvious to me, they have to conclude that I must be trying to imply something else by my utterance (i.e. I am being ironic to catch their attention).

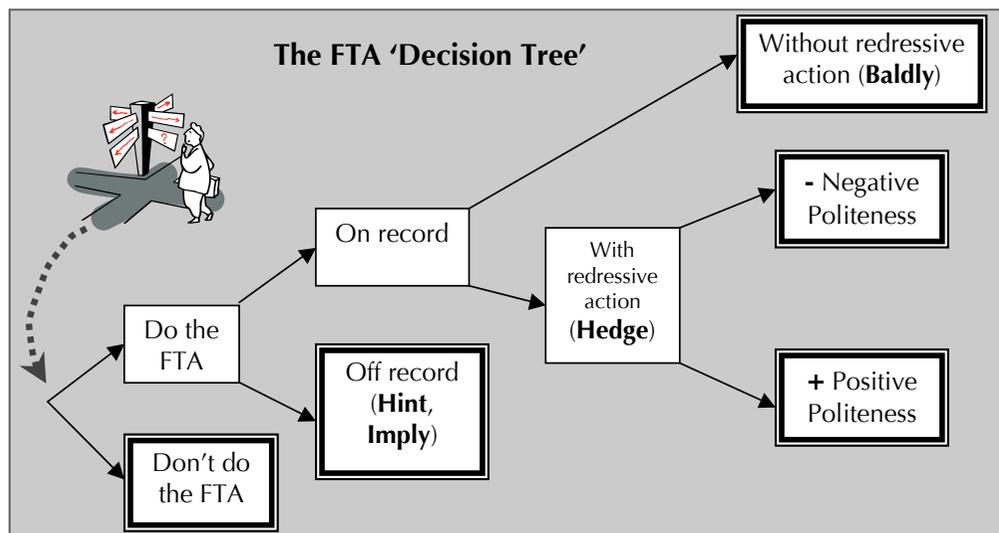
**Example 2:** I say '*The bus is late again*' to the person beside me at the bus stop. This comment is patently redundant as we both equally aware of the bus situation, so I am flouting the second maxim of quality. However, in fact I am not trying to exchange any meaningful information my intention is merely to open up the communication channels to be sociable. This is known as **phatic communion**.

## Penelope Brown & Stephen Levinson ⇨ 'Face' and Politeness

The notion of 'face' is important in pragmatics, with regard to 'losing face'. In this context your face is your sense of dignity or self-respect, your ability to hold your head up high. A **Face Threatening Act (FTA)** has the potential to damage the face of the addressee. One way of mitigating an FTA in verbal interaction is with **Politeness**. In daily conversation we encounter a variety of face threatening situations. For example:

*making requests; lodging complaints; responding with refusals; giving compliments*

So how do you deal with a situation asking you to impose on someone's face? Will you do the FTA or not?



<b>+ Politeness</b> ⇨ Claim common ground with addressee ⇨ Show interest in addressee ⇨ Seek agreement ⇨ Give sympathy	<b>- Politeness</b> ⇨ Minimize the imposition on addressee ⇨ Be indirect ⇨ Beg forgiveness ⇨ Give deference
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**e.g. Refusing a request** The tree gives us five ways to deal with a request we don't want to agree to:

**“Can you close the door?”**

- **Agree** (avoid threatening the person's self-respect)
- Refuse by **hinting**. With body language (e.g. tilt of the head, screwing up your eyes); with non-verbal input (e.g. long pause, 'mmmmm', deep sigh, etc.)
- Refuse with **positive politeness** (respect) recognising that the addressee wants to be liked and approved of by others (e.g. *Manuel, I know it's a bit noisy with the door open, and I'm feeling chilly myself, but I'm claustrophobic and closed doors make me panic. Would it be really bad for you to keep it open?*)
- Refuse with **negative politeness** (humility) showing yourself to be unimportant; allowing the addressee to go about his/her own business without imposing too much on him/her. (e.g. *'I'm sorry to make you feel uncomfortable, but I'm actually feeling pretty hot myself and I'd really like to keep the door open if that is OK with you. Even just for a couple more minutes?'*)
- **Refuse point blank** (i.e. say 'No')

## Intercultural Pragmatics & Pragmatic Transfer

Different cultures have different politeness strategies, and a hint in one culture (e.g. Japanese) may not work if translated and transferred to another language (e.g. English). Hence, L2 learners need to be aware of the pragmatic differences between their native language and the target language in order to be more effective at targeting their utterances towards their communicative ends. This is where we move away from linguistics proper, edging more into the area of interpersonal communication, considering cultural factors from such areas of study as anthropology, sociology, or psychology. So, in the case of Japanese communication we begin to get interested in such concepts as 'amae', 'isshin-denshin', 'uchi-soto', 'ura-omote', or being a *high-context* culture.

### Why is pragmatics useful to language teachers?

It helps us in the development of the communication skills of the learners we teach, by getting them to think about language appropriateness. Robert Long has developed a course book that aims at developing realistic interactive communicative skills taking into account the students' cultural identity and involving them emotionally, practicing real life scenarios. The book assesses students both on grammatical accuracy, and the appropriateness of their utterances – in other words how well their responses fit the speaking situation. **Long, R. (2006) *Stepping Out into Cross-cultural Interactions***. <http://www.perceptiapress.com/>

\* See also the SIG collection: Pragmatic Resources – *Pragmatics in Language Learning, Theory & Practice*

### Further reading

#### Concise introduction to Pragmatics

Yule, G (1996) *Pragmatics: Oxford Introductions to Language Study*. Oxford: OUP.

#### Classic books and papers:

- Austin, J. L. (1962) *How to do things with words*. Harvard University William James Lectures (1955). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1976) 'A classification of illocutionary acts' in *Language in Society* 5: 1-23.
- Grice, H. P. (1975) 'Logic and conversation' in P. Cole & J. Morgan 1975. *Syntax and Semantics (vol. 3: speech acts)* 41-58. New York: Academic Press.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen Levinson (1978) '*Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena*'. in Goody, Esther, (editor) *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, Stephen. C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### Papers relevant to Japanese and English pragmatics

- Beebe, L. & T. Takahashi (1989) 'Do you have a bag?: social status and patterned variation in S.L.A.' in S. Gaas. C. Madden. D. Preston & L. Selinker. *Variation in Second Language Acquisition: Discourse and Pragmatics*. Cleveland: Multilingual Matters.
- Beebe, L., T. Takahashi & R. Uliss-Welz (1990) 'Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals' in R. C. Scarcella, E. S. Andersen & D. Krashen. *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Blum-Kulka, S., J. House & G. Kasper (1989) *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: requests and Apologies*. Norwood, N. J.: Ablex.