Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis

MANUEL PADILLA CRUZ
University of Seville
mpadillacruz@us.es

Pragmatics and Meaning

Pragmatics is a well-established discipline in its own right which goes well beyond semantics insofar as its scope is not limited to the study of the encoded meaning of words, phrases or sentences in a vacuum. Rather, pragmatics considers a plethora of factors such as the interlocutors’ identities (their gender, age, hierarchical status, social distance, profession, membership to a community of practice or ethnic group, geographical provenance, etc.), the situational context where they interact (a professional meeting, service encounter, party, etc.), the information interlocutors rely on (beliefs and knowledge about others, habits, interaction, rights, obligations, etc.), their goals and purposes when interacting and their social and/or affective relationship.

Pragmatics presupposes that language is a socio-cultural artifact that individuals deploy in order not to simply dispense information that may modify others’ worldview, but more importantly, to interact with people: to perform actions such as asking people for things, inquiring about information, apologizing, inviting, complimenting others on their achievements, convincing them of some facts (Austin, 1962), or to create, maintain, enhance or destroy social relationships (Locher, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). It also assumes that meaning is not an inherent property of lexical items and grammatical structures, but a by-product of the intentions of the users of language. Indeed, speakers have an informative intention, or the intention to transmit (a) particular message(s) – which is somehow mentally represented, so it is a private representation– and do their best to get their interlocutors to recognize this intention. Therefore, speakers also have a communicative intention and make it overt (Sperber and Wilson, 1995).

But pragmatics also takes for granted that communication is not merely a matter of the speaker encoding messages in utterances and the hearer decoding them so as to arrive at the speaker’s meaning. The old metaphor identifying communication with an activity wherein the speaker puts her thoughts in a parcel and sends it to the receiver, who will open it and understand what the speaker means, is no longer valid. Pragmatics conceives of communication as a more complex activity: an inferential one wherein speakers do not always encode all they intend to communicate, but leave some gaps for hearers to fill. Hearers can fill those gaps thanks to their deductive abilities, which enable them to relate the bits and pieces they get from decoding input to perceptible information (the environment, previous utterances, etc.) or to the knowledge they store. Understanding utterances is seen as a process of mutual adjustment of both their explicit and implicit content, driven by considerations of cognitive effort and benefit, as a result of which hearers cannot but construct interpretative hypotheses that need confirming and accepting. In it, they carry out a series of tasks: disambiguation, conceptual adjustment, reference assignment, construction of descriptions of the attitude the speaker expresses or of the action they have performed, supplying some premises or relating the content of the utterance to contextual information in order to draw some conclusions (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Moreover, hearers also rely on their
metarepresentational or mind reading abilities, which enable them to attribute mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions) to others (Sperber, 2000).

**Meaning Negotiation**

Uttering some words or particular sentence types does not totally guarantee that hearers grasp speaker meaning correctly. Speakers may behave egocentrically and assume that hearers have access to the same cultural or contextual information as they do, which would enable them to interpret utterances as expected. Moreover, owing to certain psychological states (tiredness, absentmindedness, etc.), physical obstacles (fluency problems, swallowing, etc.) or social or communicative goals (emergency, being polite, appearing knowledgeable, etc.), speakers may fail to duly concentrate on what the form of their utterances may inadvertently transmit and/or not invest the effort necessary to think of better-suited formulations for their messages (Mustajoki, 2012). On the other hand, hearers may make mistakes at any of the inferential tasks above and arrive at unwanted interpretations, so the speaker’s informative intention may not be fulfilled. Likewise, they may read their interlocutors’ mind erroneously and attribute wrong beliefs or intentions (Yus Ramos, 1999). Consequently, misunderstanding, misinformation or even communication breakdown may ensue.

This is why interlocutors often need to negotiate meaning jointly in order to ensure correct understanding. In fact, meaning can be said to be a major joint achievement of both speakers and hearers, whose roles are constantly interchanged as a conversation takes place. Such negotiation, evidently, depends on continued interaction through discourse: exchanges of questions and answers, repetitions, reformulations of previous utterances, clarifications, confirmations, feedback indicating if the hearer follows the speaker or signals wherewith the speaker checks if the hearer is paying attention to her, etc. Throughout such a process, the speaker guides the hearer to what she intends to communicate and the hearer checks what the speaker means and indicates (in)correct comprehension. This description of communication as a joint activity explains why pragmatics is often defined as the study of meaning in interaction (Thomas, 1995), or the study of what speakers mean with some linguistic strings of words in a particular context and what hearers understand from them in that context.

Pragmatics cannot be solely restricted to analyzing how individuals intentionally and overtly use the linguistic repertoire available to them with specific interlocutors, in particular settings, in order to generate public (perceptible) representations of their private mental representations (thoughts, beliefs, intentions) and achieve specific goals. If this is considered a social approach, pragmatics must also accommodate a cognitive approach. It must delve into how individuals manipulate those public representations inferentially so as to interpret them and arrive at the intended messages. This implies that pragmatics must look into both language production and comprehension, which are the two inseparable sides of a coin, so it must adopt a socio-cognitive perspective. However, since meaning is collaboratively constructed, speaker and hearers roles are interchanged and communication is liable to failure, pragmatics must broaden its scope to include meaning negotiation as achieved discursively. This suggests that pragmatics and discourse analysis can fruitfully combine and work together with a view to unravelling how individuals co-construct meaning when interacting. This would lead to endorsing a socio-cognitive discursive approach.

**Focusing Beyond Utterances**
Since its origins in the philosophy of language, pragmatics has suffered a bias for utterance level. Over the years, the interest of many scholars has resided in the requisites individuals have to meet (felicity conditions) and the linguistic forms (semantico-syntactic formulae) they make use of when accomplishing speech acts, so as to describe and classify such acts. Common underlying assumptions seemed to be (i) that each speech act can be performed by means of a single utterance, so that one speech act corresponds to one sentence uttered, and (ii) that the encoded content is a clue to what the speaker seeks to perform, thanks in part to the occurrence of performative verbs, illocutionary force indicating devices or conventionalized or idiomatic structures (Thomas, 1995). In the case of compliments, for instance, several studies have shown that in English they are frequently realized, among others, through utterances containing any of the following structures (e.g., Manes and Wolfson, 1981):

a) NP [is/looks] (really) ADJ:
   (1) That shirt looks great on you!
b) I (really) [like/love] NP:
   (2) I really like what you have done to your hair.

However, those assumptions had to be abandoned soon. Quite frequently, speakers perform their verbal actions through series of utterances that generate *speech act sequences* or *macro-speech acts*. For example, in some varieties of Spanish, the head act of inquiring about a price may be preceded by *alerters* that draw the interlocutor's attention (3), or a *supportive move* that somehow announces what the speaker is about to do and mitigates the force of the act (4):

(3) Disculpa/Disculpe/Perdona/Perdone. ¿Me dices/dice el precio de este mantel?
   ‘Excuse me. Can/could you tell me the price of this tablecloth?’
(4) ¿Me permite una preguntita? ¿Cuánto cuesta esta blusa?
   ‘Do you allow me a question? How much is this blouse?’

Head acts, alerters and supportive moves need not be produced in a same conversational turn, but can appear in different ones as a conversation unfolds, depending, for instance, on whether the hearer shows uptake or reacts to the act performed in a *preferred* or *dispreferred* manner. This can be seen in the following exchange illustrating an adjacency pair of offer and refusal, after which A reiterates her offer indirectly in the second turn in order to insist on her willingness to give B a lift:

(5) A: Hey Mark! Do you need a ride downtown?
   B: Oh, no, not really. Thank you. I can walk.
   A: We are going in the same direction.

Accordingly, many intentional verbal actions can be portrayed as series of distinct micro-acts that are intertwined and enchained along a conversation, thus making up longer macro-acts. In them, what speakers say only achieves meaning once hearers respond or react to it. Indeed, whether many acts can actually be said to have been realized depends heavily on hearers' contributions in their subsequent turn(s). In the case of complimenting, a particular utterance can be said to count as a compliment if the...
hearer reacts to it by showing acceptance through appreciation tokens, comment appreciations or praise upgrades, or rejecting it through tokens of disagreement, questioning responses or utterances in which he scales down the compliment, among others.

**Shifting to a Discursive Approach**

The amount of verbal material necessary to realize some actions in some contexts and hearers’ responses are also contingent on the tacit norms and rules interlocutors abide by, which also deserve attention in order to understand their communicative behaviors. Such rules and norms cause individuals in some Eastern cultures, for example, to engage in a sort of ritualistic tug of war when making invitations, in which the inviter has to repeat her invitation after a couple of initial refusals from the invitee. In some varieties of English, two interlocutors who get along well may chit-chat for a while and comment on their whereabouts and some other trivialities, thus generating *phatic sequences* in order to open a conversation (Ebsworth et al., 1996, p. 94):

(6) A: Bea!
B: Michelle!
A: Where've you been? I haven't seen you around.
B: We were away. We just got back. What's new with you? What have you been up to?
A: [Michelle reports on neighborhood news] We missed you. How are you? It's nice to see you. Where’d you go?
B: [Bea describes her vacation].
A: Well, I’m glad you're back. It's so nice to see you. I missed talking to you.
B: Aw. Well, we're back! How have you been doing?

Those norms and rules have a cultural nature and are disseminated throughout the members of communities of practice and wider social groups. Cultural rules may even dictate who is expected to greet first, who can begin a phatic sequence, the length of such sequence or the value that features such as pace may acquire. Among such norms and rules are those connected with politeness.

(Im)Politeness has aroused much interest in pragmatists adopting a social approach. These have examined how interlocutors’ verbal behavior is conditioned by certain underlying assumptions and perceptions of psycho-social factors such as their power or social distance (Brown and Levinson, 1987) or the desire to avoid offence or conflict (Lakoff, 1973), to treat others as they deserve or to satisfy particular expectations (Fraser, 1990). A variety of models has emerged, some of which with a remarkable impact. Eelen (2001) labels them *core models*; these include the *conversational-maxim* approach by R. Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), who propose additional interactive maxims complementing Grice’s (1975) *cooperative principle*. For Leech (1983), some verbal acts (e.g., ordering, requesting) are inherently impolite, while others (e.g., complimenting, congratulating) are inherently polite. Accordingly, politeness consists of minimizing the impact of impolite acts and maximizing that of polite ones. Another core model is the *face-saving* approach of Brown and Levinson (1987), who also conceive of some actions as threatening social harmony, so they require softening or mitigation by means of a wide array of linguistic strategies.
The drawback of these models is their excessive reliance on utterance-level: (im)politeness is assumed to be anticipated by the speaker, who can somehow foresee the risks of her verbal actions and not the result of the hearer’s assessment of the speaker’s behavior, and mitigation is thought to be planned for specific discourse fragments (Eelen, 2001). More recently, a number of studies—the so-called postmodernist wave—has voiced the need to move from the analysts’ interpretations as filtered by their intuitions and the theoretical apparatus of the models they rely on, and take into account interlocutors’ own perceptions of (im)politeness as they surface in ongoing conversations through their (verbal) reactions and responses. This involves adopting a discursive approach in order to examine how individuals present their social identities and create, maintain or modify their relationships through verbal acts and their reactions to these, and how they negotiate the import of their acts in wider stretches that exceed utterance-level (Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2007). Discourse analysis is therefore a most helpful asset to pragmatics that can certainly contribute to a better appraisal of how individuals do not simply inform others, but also manage rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) or do relational work (Locher, 2006).

Within a discursive approach, speakers and hearers should be seen as collaborating at each step in the joint endeavor of co-constructing meaning and handling their social relationship. By means of the conceptual content of utterances, the speaker directs the hearer’s attention to certain sets of assumptions and brings to the fore those she expects the hearer to exploit. Thus, she helps the hearer select the mental context wherein to interpret what is said and figure out the premises necessary to arrive at implicit contents, if necessary. Thanks to the procedural devices employed (discourse markers, pronouns, deictics, intonation, interjections, etc.), the speaker also indicates how the hearer should relate different items of information and assists him to construct the adequate descriptions capturing her attitude to the propositional content communicated and what she intends to do with her words (Wilson and Sperber, 1993). Accordingly, communication should be depicted as a ball, in which the speaker initially takes the lead in her turn and then passes it to the hearer, who will subsequently take it in his turn and pass it back to the speaker again (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Meaning progressively emerges and is confirmed or negotiated during this ball.

SEE ALSO: Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis; Discourse and Identity; Politeness; Politeness and Face Research; Pragmatics in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Speech Acts Research.

References


**Suggested Readings**