

BRANCH OF LINGUISTICS KNOWN AS PRAGMATICS

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ANNOTATION

Pragmatic refers to something that is practical or rational. When someone describes you as pragmatic, they are referring to your tendency to think in terms of the practical or logical rather than the ideal situation.

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is a specialist branch of study in linguistics (the study of language), focused on the interaction between natural language and its users. Pragmatics is concerned with conversational implicatures, or what a speaker implies and the listener infers. Experts sometimes compare and contrast pragmatics with linguistic semantics (the meaning of a phrase), syntax (word order), or semiotics (the study of symbols), all of which are independent terminology.

In contrast to semantics, the term pragmatics is utilized. Semantics is concerned with the definition of a term or text. Pragmatics is the study of how words are employed in everyday situations. Words can mean different things in different contexts, and the same word can imply different things in different contexts. Words can also have symbolic meaning, and we will use our understanding of symbols while we read or listen to others in practice.

Pragmatics can be traced back to antiquity, when rhetoric was considered one of the three liberal arts. Between 1780 and 1830, Britain, France, and Germany developed the more contemporary concept of pragmatics. Between 1880 and 1930, linguists studying language philosophy agreed on a point of view that language must be examined in the context of discourse and life, and that language itself is a type of human action. Linguistics is now an interdisciplinary field of study that includes the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Indirect speech acts point up the fact that illocutionary forces are not (always) encoded by the grammatical and lexical features of sentence types. An influential alternative to this coding view of speech acts is one that involves a kind of inferential reasoning about linguistic forms in context. In such a view, participants recognize that the utterance of (10b) in context is not in fact functioning (merely) as an assertion about the odor emitted by the turtle. Assuming that the addressee has some responsibility for the disposition of the turtle, they could then infer that there is a covert point to the statement: namely, that (10b) is actually a request that the addressee do something about the turtle. Indirect speech acts point up the difference between what has been termed “speaker meaning” and “sentence meaning” in much of the pragmatics literature. While we might say the “sentence meaning” of (10b) has the illocutionary force of an assertion, the speaker “means” (or intends) something different by it; namely, they

mean to issue a request or directive, as in the “sentence meaning” of (11b). This distinction is pertinent to a variety of different situations in which meaning in context is seen as not reflecting the “literal” meaning of an utterance (e.g., hints, irony, metaphor, and a range of other conventional and conversational implicatures). The distinction between speaker meaning and sentence meaning, developed notably in the work of Paul Grice <iel0147>, allows for a neat distinction of semantics (sentence meaning) from pragmatics (speaker meaning). Gricean pragmatics distinguishes itself as a branch of linguistics concerned with 1) a kind of meaning based on speakers’ intentions <iel0173> (as opposed to the context-independent meaning of lexical and grammatical forms) and 2) a kind of inferential reasoning that allows participants to connect what is said to what is meant (as opposed to the rule- and convention-based accounts offered in grammatical and semantic analyses).

As sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and others have explored the multiple functions of language that center on indexical relations of speech to its contexts of use, philosophers have probed ways in which the propositional capacity of language is itself tied inextricably to contextualized uses of language. As noted earlier, Austin’s discussion of speech acts was radical in the context of the logical positivism of its day in arguing that the propositional capacity of language is embedded in acts of using language.

Determinations of truth and falsity, then, are bound to speech act considerations like felicity conditions. For instance, The woman burying the tortoise over there is acting oddly. may be judged true or false even if the woman happens to be burying a turtle, not a tortoise. Though nothing is denoted by the noun phrase “the woman burying a tortoise over there,” what renders (19) a functioning proposition is that the noun phrase successfully refers to someone for participants in the interaction. Propositionally, then, depends in part on the success of a speech act—reference—in context and not entirely on a de-contextualized sense of the correct denotation of terms. Causal theories of reference propose an even more thorough-going relationship between speech acts, contextual use, and propositional meaning. According to this account of reference, proper names <iel0282> come to refer to an individual through an illocutionary act of naming (i.e. a baptism) that fixes a name to its referent. Future uses of the name are parasitic on that originary act, causally connected to it through a history of usage that links later acts of reference to the initial baptism. The meaning of a name is not dependent on the descriptive associations that might be tied to the name, but on a history of use.

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that investigates the ways language is tied to the contexts in which it is used. As this definition indicates, pragmatics coalesces as a distinct and coherent domain of inquiry only in relation to the study of language abstracted from its use in context, which has been the prime focus of both twentieth century linguistics and philosophy of language. The topics typically discussed under the heading of pragmatics arise from a variety of difficulties and impasses encountered in the analysis of language extracted from context; and as a result, they compose a motley collection, including deixis, presupposition, speech acts, implicatures, politeness, information structure, and so on.

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