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Pragmatics: Overview

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Introduction

Traditionally, pragmatics has been considered as forming a triad with syntax and semantics (a partition originally ascribed to Charles Morris, and inspired by ideas from the philosopher Charles S. Peirce). Here, syntax is considered to be the study of the formal relations of one sign to another, while semantics studies the relations of signs to objects in the outside world. Finally, pragmatics is thought of as the relation of signs to those who interpret the signs, the users of language (Morris, 1938: 6). It is the latter part of Morris' definition that will be the guiding point of this article; however, the original restriction to signs will be relaxed, such that we now speak of communication in a very broad sense, also including nonverbal means such as gestures and body movements. The emphasis of this modern study of pragmatics is, as it was for Morris, on the user; however, the user is not thought of here as an isolated individual, but as a social animal in the Aristotelian sense: a being that is dependent on the context in which she or he lives, but at the same time is able to interact with and change that context through the use of signs – read: human language and other human communicative means.

Understanding and Misunderstanding

People talk in order to communicate. Good communication happens when speakers understand each other correctly, that is, in accordance with what the speaker means and the hearer understands the speaker to mean. When such an understanding does not occur, the communicative situation becomes one of misunderstanding rather than of understanding.

Many people (including most linguists) believe that communication, and hence understanding, depends solely on the words spoken. The famous reply to a journalist's question, "Read my lips," attributed to former U.S. President George H. W. Bush, expresses a belief in the validity of the verbal utterance as proffered by a speaker, without regard either to what the speaker may have had in mind or to the actual circumstances of the speaking and reading.

Another widespread error is made by people who believe that human communication should obey

(or actually obeys) the rules embodied in what is usually called grammar (by many linguists interpreted as "a device that will generate all the correct sentences of a language, and no incorrect ones," as Noam Chomsky and his followers have preached ever since 1957, the year in which Chomsky's first and very successful treatise on syntactic structures appeared; Chomsky, 1957). This assumption (which has survived in a number of avatars, also among nonlinguists) was publicly denounced as a fallacy soon after its first public appearance; celebrated linguists such as the late Archibald Hill, anthropologists such as Dell Hymes, and sociologists such as Erwing Goffman all were quick to point out that human communication very rarely proceeds in accordance with the strict rules of grammar. Pronouncing a correct sentence belongs in the realm of the impossible, not to say pure fantasy: real people speak in ways that are rather far away from the strictures of the grammarians, yet they are often, if not always, understood correctly (in the sense in which I used this word above).

But what happens when misunderstandings occur? What are the reasons for people's wrong apprehensions of their interlocutors' utterances? Is it the case that they do not understand the words that are spoken? Or are there deeper reasons for misunderstanding?

While it is true that understanding a message to some degree depends on a correct interpretation of the words being used, as well as on a certain respect for the usual form these words and their combinations take in any given language (not to speak of a pronunciation that is not prone to being perceived wrongly, or not at all), it remains the case that words, no matter how well chosen and correctly joined and pronounced, do not convey the entire message, or even the major portion of what we intend to say. Popular handbooks of communication and advertising often propagate the slogan that in business, the words count for 5%, the body language for the remaining 95% of your message. While this may be somewhat of an exaggeration, the point these business communication experts want to make is clear: words taken by themselves will not do the job; understanding a message is more than a verbal matter.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1995) distinguishes between a simple misunderstanding (French: *malentendu*, or *méconnaissance*, i.e., a wrong understanding, or even a lack of understanding) and a misunderstanding on a deeper level (French: *mésentente*), where understanding is not only difficult, but even impossible, because there is not, and cannot be, any common platform where all the involved parties can meet. According to Rancière, this is the usual, unfortunate situation especially in politics (1995: 12–13); but also in daily life, it frequently happens that one person does not understand what the other is saying, not because the words are not clear or the phrasing ambiguous, but simply because the one interlocutor does not **see** what the other is talking about, or because she or he interprets that which the other is talking about as something entirely different. In Rancière's words,

> The cases of misunderstanding are those in which the dispute on "what speaking means" [an allusion to the seminal work by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*; 1982] constitutes the very rationality of the speech situation. In that situation, the interlocutors both do and do not mean the same thing by the same words. There are all sorts of reasons why a certain person X understands, and yet does not understand, another person Y: because, while he perceives clearly what the other tells him, he also does not **see** the object of which the other speaks to him; or even, because he understands, and must understand, sees and wants to make seen, another object represented by the same words, another reasoning contained in the same argument (Rancière 1995: 13; my translation and emphasis).

It is the task of pragmatics to clarify for us what it means to 'see and not to see' an object of which the 'same words' are being used, yet are understood in different, even deeply diverging ways. Notable examples of this '(mis-)use' are found in political discourse, the very subject of Rancière's reflections: words such as 'freedom,' 'democracy,' 'peace,' and so on have over the ages been consistently and willfully misunderstood and misused in political discourse. The deeper reason for such misunderstandings is not in what the words mean (and certainly not what they originally may have meant; here, the Greek roots of the word 'democracy' and its original meaning of 'people power' provide a sad example). The way we understand a word has to do with the situation in which it is being used, and that means: a situation where speakers and hearers engage in a 'common scene' (Rancière's expression) where they meet and discuss, respecting each other's background and underlying assumptions about what exactly is common to them as actors on that scene, in a particular situation of language use.

Situations and Contexts

A situation can be roughly described as a meeting of human interactants having a common background and trying to realize a common goal. Exactly how common those backgrounds and goals are can be the subject of much dispute, and even seemingly insignificant details may generate heated controversy (such as the seating order at a conference table; enter the round table, which minimizes to a certain degree

problems of seating and precedence). The situation also comprises the various real world circumstances that either have occasioned the meeting or are material in creating its context. More broadly speaking, the notion of context may be taken as comprising all the circumstances that go into defining the backgrounds and goals of the interactants, including what has been, and is being, and possibly will be, said at a meeting. More narrowly, we may concentrate on the verbal part of the meeting and the immediate environment of the words spoken, and talk of cotext, rather than context; I will use the broader term here (*see* **Context, Communicative**).

A situational context is not just a listing of what is there and who are there: it must take into account where they, the interactants, come from, in more than one sense of the term. The background from which the interactants act and speak is decisive for their possibilities of interacting (in political meetings, this is often captured by the term 'mandate'). Moreover, a context is not just given once and for all: it is a dynamic notion in that it constantly adjusts itself to the new developments in the interaction, seen against the original background (which may then be changed itself, and a new mandate given). What people bring to the situation in the guise of presuppositions and expectations is an important, albeit often not too visible part of the context. Nevertheless, and precisely because it is not directly observable, this hidden context plays a major role in determining the possibilities and liabilities of the interactants. It would be a mistake, however, to think that bringing such presuppositions out in the open automatically furthers successful interaction; in many situations, e.g., in business transactions, the interlocutors play their cards close to their chests and rely on the tacit understanding of their backgrounds that the others hopefully have, or at least pretend to have (*see* **Pragmatic Presupposition**).

Most importantly, all situations are subject to major world constraints, which govern the interactants and keep them in line, so to speak. There are both written and unwritten rules for what can be said and done and what cannot be said or done in a situation; these rules of the game depend on the way the situation is incorporated into a larger political and social frame (e.g., labor negotiations have to abide by certain rules limiting the length of the negotiating period or the extent to which existing agreements can be changed or renounced). The power that resides in the individual interlocutors (e.g., to strike a deal, to call off a strike or lockout, to conclude an accord, and so on) is vested in them on account of their social and commercial position. An interlocutor speaks not only with his or her own voice, but repeats, or re-sounds, the Voice of the Master, i.e., the institution to which he or she belongs.

This leads us to consider the speaker's role in a situation as bound by social and other convention; any speech act (see below) that is uttered during a negotiation situation can only have the force that is allowed it, based on the speaker's social and institutional placement. Conversely, such a voicing of the situation can itself contribute to the establishment of a powerful or power-like situation; words and actions interact dialectically with contexts and situations. Consider the following case, adapted from the Swiss novelist Friedrich Dürrenmatt's short story *The breakdown* (Dürrenmatt, 1956).

In the story, a traveling salesman meets three people in the dining room of a hotel in the little provincial town where he has to spend the night because his car has broken down. For some reason, the three gentlemen seem to be happy to see him, and invite him for a late supper at the home of one of their number. During and after the meal, the conversation focuses more and more on the hosts' past occupations of attorney general, judge, and trial lawyer, respectively. In the end, the trio enacts a mock court session in which the traveling salesman (who by now has lost all sense of time and space) is condemned to the severest penalties for his past misdeeds.

What is interesting here is the way in which, by force of their earlier societal standing, the three men manage to create the illusion of a court session in which the accused ends up confessing his crimes and accepting his sentence. The relevance of Dürrenmatt's legal game is that it shows us how the law is not only embodied in institutional roles and legal language, but depends on the social environment, the context in which that language is practiced. The hapless traveler who fell into the clutches of the quasi-practicing legal trio was every bit as damned as he would have been had he been condemned by a regular court.

Societally institutionalized speech acts were among the first to be discovered by Austin (1962). The concept of the social context has been valuable not only as a classificatory criterion, but also because it makes us look at what speech acts really do, and how they are able to do what they do, as we will see below. In our example, the speech act of sentencing not only brought about a changed state of affairs (the sentenced person was supposed to go to jail), but it also (re-)created the legal system whose reality it confirmed (by the pronouncing of the sentence). Not only does the social context allow for and determine what is appropriate speech acting in the context, it is itself construed through the use of the appropriate language: societal institutions are (re-)instituted through the use of speech acts. This is the social,

psychological, and above all pragmatic significance of the practical joke perpetrated on the poor traveler in the Dürrenmatt story.

Speech and Speech Acts

Above, I mentioned John L. Austin, the Oxford philosopher, as one of the great sources of inspiration for our modern thinking on how language works, or on "how to do things with words," in Austin's own immortal formulation (1962). Austin's contribution is linked to the concept of the speech act, a use of language that not only says, but does. The idea is of course not new: many of us are familiar with the institution of the religious sacrament (such as the Christian baptism). Here, the notion that a formula (such as used in administering baptism) works in force of the words spoken ("I baptize thee"), in tandem with the action performed (letting water flow across the baptizee's head). That the sacral action is performed as denoted by the words is at the basis of the belief according to which the sacrament is effective, not by force of the sayer, but by force of the words spoken and the act done. In Catholic theology, this aspect of the action goes by the label of *ex opere operato* 'in force of the act that is performed'; in speech act theory we talk about an aspect of a speech act, the performative or perlocutionary effect, that comes in addition to the words spoken (the locutionary aspect) and the point of the act (the illocutionary aspect), which makes it into precisely this act and no other (*see* **Speech Acts and Grammar**).

For Austin, speech acts could be distinguished and neatly labeled according to their 'point' or illocutionary force: ordering, asserting, requesting, and so forth. Austin's student John R. Searle, who later went back to the United States and taught at Berkeley, systematized and extended Austin's classification of speech acts and in particular, systematized the conditions that would make a speech act legal and effective (rather than 'misfiring,' as Austin called it, e.g., when the person executing an institutional act such as a marriage ceremony does not have the necessary credentials). These felicity conditions, as they often are called, comprise such matters as the agent's sincerity (e.g., in proffering a promise), the agent's or recipient's ability to be acted upon (in our society, a person cannot be legally married a second time as long as his or her first marriage is in force), and so on. Searle's merit is to have systematized not only Austin's speech acts, but in particular to have perfected his assignment of the conditions that must be met before a speech act can be said to be valid (*see* **Speech Acts**).

But there is more to this than meet the eye (or the act). Unfortunately, Searle not only developed Austin, but in doing so technologized him (Melrose, 1996: 61–62). Searle's main interest was not how to do things with words, but how to systematize and describe the words that do those things, the speech acts as such. It may be said about Austin that he never was overly technical about his speech acts – something which earned him scorn from later speech act theorists (Mey, 2001: 117–118). In Austin's original thinking, it is the words that have to be "to some extent 'explained' by the 'context' in which they have been actually spoken" (Austin, 1962: 100; the scare quotes are Austin's own). Austin is interested in the context because he wanted to "study the total speech in the total situation" (Austin, 1962: 148), which is exactly what pragmatics is all about. Whereas Austin was doing things with words, Searle is describing acts of speech.

The Problem of the Indirect Speech Act

For Austin and many of his followers, a speech act is primarily expressed by what is called a speech act verb, that is, a verb whose main function is to signal and execute the appropriate act. For instance, when I say *I promise*, the verb *to promise* is the appropriate (sometimes called canonical) expression for this particular act (*see* **Speech Acts and Grammar**).

Early on, it was noticed that many speech acts are performed successfully without the help of the canonical verb. For instance, I can confirm a promise, or even make one, by simply saying what I'm going to do, or by uttering an affirmative reply to a question. The most outstanding example of a solemn promise (a vow) that does not use the verb *to promise* is when man and wife promise each other to be faithful and supportive *until death doth them part*. The promise is uttered by the auxiliary (or tag) verb 'to do' (a tag verb is one that repeats the tagged portion of the main verb construction, as in *Do you...? Yes I do*).

More generally, the appropriate speech act can be expressed by reference to one of the conditions that Austin and Searle stipulated as necessary for successfully performing such an act. One can, for example, inquire about a person's ability to give information or perform a task, as in *Can you tell me the time?* or *Could you close that window?* In such cases, the inquiry is understood not as a mere preliminary to a request for information or action, but as the act itself of asking for information or requesting a favor, respectively. Such acts are called indirect, since they lead the addressee to infer, from the fact that a request was formulated regarding an ability or willingness,

that the request in fact was about the object of the ability or willingness (in this case, to give out information or to close a window).

Interestingly, contrary to what seemed to be the original motivation behind classifying speech acts and speech act verbs, the indirect way of doing things with words is, in many cases, the preferred one. I have called this phenomenon the 'indirect speech act paradox' (Mey, 2001; *see* **Pragmatic Acts**); it is confirmed by observations such as that by Levinson (1983) that "most usages of requests are indirect," whereas such speech as orders are seldom, if ever, executed by the canonical verb form, the imperative mood: "imperatives are rarely used to command or request" (Levinson, 1983: 264, 275; see further Mey, 2001: 111). A particular use of indirectness in speech acting is found in the phenomenon called inferring by implicature; more on this below.

Indexing and Inferring

To get a handle on the phenomenon of inference, let's first consider the use of what linguists call deictic elements. These are words and expressions that directly refer to persons, objects, situations, etc. by 'pointing' to them, using what is called *deixis* (the Greek word for 'pointing to, indicating'; the human forefinger is called 'index' because it is our first and foremost natural pointing instrument). Thus, when I say *I* about myself, I point to the person that I am; *you* points to the person away from me, *viz*., an actual or potential interlocutor (*see* **Deixis and Anaphora: Pragmatic Approaches**).

Most languages have a more or less elaborate system of such 'pointers' that help us identify persons and situations when we are interacting verbally and otherwise. We can refer to a book that is mine, as 'this book,' whereas a book that is yours, or in your possession, may be called 'your book' or 'that book.' But deictics have other functions as well. 'That' can also express contempt (*that son of a bitch*) or respect (*gimme that old time religion*). Moreover, such 'indexing' can happen even without my knowing or willing, as when "my speech betrays me": the language I speak reveals ('indexes') my social or local roots, as happened for St. Peter in the famous betrayal scene, after he had three times publicly denied having ever set eyes on "that man," Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 27:70–72).

Conversely, we can use this kind of indexing to provoke a reaction in our interlocutors. For instance, using high-falutin language and 'expensive' words can create an impression of scholarship and learning. When I doctor my speech to create such a (possibly false) impression, I base myself on the hopeful assumption that people who hear this particular kind of language will infer that I indeed belong to the class of educated people (alternatively, they may infer that I am a terrible snob).

As in the case of the indirect speech acts, what is said is not the whole story. Based on my actual knowledge of the world and the input from my interlocutors, I make certain inferences, albeit indirectly and perhaps not always convincingly and/or justifiably. The main point is that we are able to communicate certain thoughts or feelings, using indirect means and relying on the common world situation (or scene) that we are part of.

We imply certain things about ourselves and the world when we use deictics and other indexicals in this way; our interlocutors are supposed to make the proper inferences in order to successfully understand us or communicate with us. That such an understanding may be wrong, or even willfully distorted, is one of the secrets of the successful mystery or detective story; the innocent reader is led down a 'garden path' of false inferences, to be suddenly confronted with the real state of affairs in a moment of truth.

As an example, consider the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar's 'Story with spiders' (*Historia con migalas*; Cortázar, 1984), in which the readers are made to believe certain things about a couple vacationing on an island in the Caribbean. The sinister impact of their activities and the relationship to their earlier exploits of the same murderous kind is hinted at in the very last lines of the narrative, when the couple is unmasked as a nefarious, female duo bent on destroying men (hence the title word 'spiders,' which contains an important, but not sufficient clue). What the author does here is to play on our implicit understanding of the language (in Spanish as in English, the default couple is male plus female), in order to have us infer the normalcy of the situation, only to shock us back into the real world when the identity of the spiders is revealed, again by the use of an indexical element: a female adjectival ending. Only then do we infer the couple's identity; the rest of the gruesome inferences are left to our imagination and our ability to put two and two together on the basis of clues provided earlier. (A complete analysis of this intriguing piece of text is given in Mey, 1992) (*see* **Literary Pragmatics**.)

Next, we will discuss a particular way of implying, and see how proper inferences may be drawn using the notion of cooperation. (On inferring vs. implying, see Thomas, 1996: 58–59).

Cooperating and Implying

A pragmatic view of language bases itself, as we have seen, on the ways speakers and hearers are able to communicate in a given situation. A very important factor in this is the speakers' willingness to enter the situation with a decision to cooperate with their partners. The Berkeley philosopher H. Paul Grice is famous for having formulated the Cooperative Principle, stating the human need for, and extent of, cooperation in conversation, a principle that he detailed further in the four so-called conversational maxims, which guide the speakers and hearers through the conversational maze in a mutually satisfying way (see Mey, 2001: 71ff) (*see* **Cooperative Principle**).

The fact that cooperation is, so to speak, built into the very marrow of conversation makes us prepared to accept what is offered in conversational exchange, as being of relevance to our needs and interests. If I ask somebody for the time of day, I take it that he or she will cooperate and tell me the time, and not make some completely ludicrous remark about the state of the world. Or, "What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?" as the Gospel tells us (Matt. 7:9). Conversely, we may make our intentions clear by precisely not answering a question in the expected way, or not fulfilling a reasonable request. If the father did give his son a stone for bread, he probably wanted to tell him something about the way the world is organized: people taking advantage of each other, even cheating on each other. However, in a more subtle way I can use this indirectness to appeal to an understanding of the situation that is built into the very question, so to speak. The innocent question *What time is it?* can correctly and satisfactorily be answered indirectly by referring to an event that both interlocutors know as denoting a particular time. In my Norwegian house, where we had very little traffic on the county road passing by our house, the utterance: *The bus just went by* would be a completely happy answer to a request for the correct time: there was only one bus a day, and it passed our house at exactly 7:45 AM on its way to Oslo.

When we answered the time question indirectly, we implied a reference to something that was commonly known. Grice has extended this notion of implying to something he called (with a self-concocted term, as he admits; Grice, 1981: 184–185) an *implicature* (*see* **Implicature**). Implicatures can be thought of as infringements on conversational cooperation, by going against one or the other of the conversational maxims. One such maxim is that of relation (or relevance: my answer must have some relevance to the question asked; *see* **Relevance Theory**). When we look for a relevant feature in an answer that *prima facie* seems to have little to do with what I was asking about, the implicature is of something behind the answer.

Grice's famous example is of the uncooperative college professor who, in reply to a request for a recommendation, writes that the student in question has always attended his lectures, and is a capable English speller. By not saying anything that is relevant (e.g., in a job application for an academic position), the professor implicitly indicates that the student is not a person he wants to recommend. So what at first looked like an uncooperative answer, in the end achieves the communicative needs of the situation by implicitly providing an answer that is useful to the requester.

Or consider the case of the person (related in Mey, 2001: 78–79) who is asked for an I.D. card on entering a discotheque and remarks to the doorman that she is the mother of four. Given that the drinking age at that point of time in this particular state (Louisiana) was 18, the fact of having four children more or less precludes the speaker's being under age for the purpose of drinking. But this is not said directly; the answer is a 'flout' of the maxim of relation (what does having children have to do with drinking?), but the implicature makes this a potentially good reply. In the actual case, however, the doorman refuses to recognize the implicature, and answers by another flouting of the maxim of relevance: "Yes, and I'm the Pope's granddad" – a truly absurd assertion given the ages of the then reigning pope (Paul VI in his later years) and of the doorman (at most 25). This new flout therefore implicated an answer in the spirit of: "You can tell me what you like but I cannot believe you at face value; show me an I.D. or just leave" (*see* **Maxims and Flouting**; refer also to a recent study by Greenall, 2002).

The 'Garden Path' and 'Bestrangement'

A particular form of implying is often called the already mentioned 'garden path': an interlocutor is made to infer an implicature that is not really there (but only exists in the speaker's mind), but then is intentionally suggested as valid in order to lead the conversational partner(s) astray. The motivation for creating such implicatures can be either political, as in the anecdote below (which I have called Adam in the Garden; Mey, 2001: 258–259), or of a literary kind (as in the Cortázar example referred to earlier).

During the election campaign of 1970, incumbent Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of the 18th Congressional District, was giving a press conference outside his opponent's headquarters at 135th Street

and 7th Avenue in Harlem, New York City. A heckler interrupted him, asking him if he was going to be present at the antinarcotics parade to be held the next day, a Saturday, "like he'd promised." To which Powell replied that of course, nothing would keep him from attending. A moment later, the heckler interrupted again, wanting to make absolutely sure that the Congressman would be present at the parade. Powell, visibly irritated, reiterated his assurance, and went on with his speech. The heckler then intervened a third time, stating that "Well, Mr. Powell, sir, you ain't gonna be at that parade, 'cause there ain't gonna be one and we never spoke of one" (Source: *Harper's Magazine*, April 1971).

If we ask ourselves what was happening on that preelection Harlem Friday, we can say that the speech acts of asking questions (by the heckler) did not presuppose the existence of a real answer. The questions were disingenuous: the person asking them was well aware of their duplicity. The technique of the garden path leads the unsuspecting listener (or reader) into a verbal trap, which is then sprung at the crucial moment. Often (as in the case above), this is done with the intention of making a fool of the listener and (for political reasons, as in this case) humiliating him or her publicly. In order to better understand this technique, one could ask questions such as what speech acts can be identified in this interchange and how the Cooperative Principle applies here (if it does at all). Another interesting question would be how one could have saved Congressman Powell from going down the path, asking in particular where he took what first wrong step, and how he could have counter speech-acted to the heckler's remarks.

In other cases (mostly in a literary context) the use of the garden path is akin to the technique of making familiar things unfamiliar, a procedure called defamiliarization or bestrangement (*see* **Literary Pragmatics**). The point here is to jolt the reader and obtain some kind of narrative shock effect; the effect is obtained by allowing the reader to make the normal inferences based on what we know about society, language, and ourselves. When we enter a room, we expect there to be windows; anything that looks like a window will be seen and perceived as such. When we read about a couple taking a vacation, our inference is that of the normal, heterosexual couple. When Cortázar, in the story referred to above, suddenly breaks into our normal world by unveiling the true character of this couple, we are suddenly confronted with another view of our society, one in which the normal couple may be a same-sex one. The garden path teaches us something about the paths that are there, as well as about paths not taken by everybody.

Situated Speech and Pragmatic Acts

On the basis of the examples given, we conclude that any speech act, in order to be successfully executed, not only has to obey the conditions laid down by speech act theorists such as Searle and Grice, but in addition must be appropriately uttered, that is, it has to respect and conform with the situation in which it is executed.

A recent controversy erupting around the Danish army contingent stationed in Iraq was provoked by the fact that one of their translators balked at rendering Danish swear words verbatim into Arabic during prisoner interrogation at the Danish contingent's headquarters. Whereas the Danish interrogating officer was of the opinion that the Iraqi prisoners ought to be roughed up a bit by among other things, verbal intimidation, including threats and swear words, the native Syrian interpreter (who had spent most of his adult life in Denmark and hence was completely familiar with typical Danish swearing behavior) refused to go ahead and use words that, in his view, not only were offensive, but also would not work in the situation. He expressed as his considered opinion that an Iraqi would attribute the use of such swear terms, when translated literally into Arabic, as offensive verbal behavior, indexing an uneducated person. It would put the speaker far below the addressee, socially and interactionally, and preclude any cooperation. Hence the technique that the Danish interrogation officer wanted to employ was not appropriate to the situation, and an inappropriate act of interrogating would elicit no proper response. The interpreter, who clearly perceived the Danish and the Iraqi attitude as situationally incompatible sent in his letter of resignation 5 weeks prior to the expiration of his term, accompanied by an explanatory letter addressed to his commanding officer. This letter was then printed in the Danish press, causing a huge commotion; a public scandal erupted, resulting among other things in the Danish interrogation officer being recalled from duty in Iraq.

As we saw in the case of the indirect speech acts, such acts receive their full potential usefulness from the situation in which they are properly uttered. What is lacking in verbal explicitation, is supplied by the implicit conditions of the situation. But conversely, the situation conditions the appropriate utterances in the sense that it enables certain utterances and excludes others, as we saw in the case of the bilingual Danish-Arabic interpreter.

Generalizing these observations, we may say that no speech act is complete, or even possible, without, and outside of, its proper situational conditions. A speech act, in order to be properly executed, has to be

situated properly. This condition comprises not just the words spoken, but the presuppositions that are inherent in a situation, such as a nationally and culturally oriented understanding of proper linguistic behavior; a familiarity with conditions leading up to, as well as away from, a situated speech act; an understanding of the individual utterer's personal and social self-image; a correct interpretation of the accompanying body language and gestures; and so on and so forth. If we take all these aspects together, we arrive at the conclusion that there are no speech acts as such (except in the treatises and grammars written by linguists) and also, that every speech act, in order to be a valid act, must be rooted in a situation that supplies it with legitimacy (*see* **Pragmatic Presupposition**; **Intercultural Pragmatics and Communication**).

As we have seen, this legitimacy has not just to do with speaking, but more so, maybe even mostly, with the social and situational command that one has of the situation in which the words are spoken. Already Austin, in his *How to do things with words*, had had this insight (cf. the quotation above); for him, the primordial speech act was precisely a situated one. True, Austin interpreted this situation as one of strict societally defined custom (such as institutional surroundings in a court room, a lecture hall, or a church); my interpretation expands on this by saying that every situation belongs to some institution, whether officially constituted or not, and that every act of speaking is a situationally grounded and legitimated activity (*see* **Institutional Talk**). To characterize such an activity, I have coined the term 'pragmatic act' (*see* **Pragmatic Acts**). "Pragmatic acts are pragmatic because they base themselves on language as constrained by the situation, not as defined by syntactic rules or by semantic selections and conceptual restrictions. Pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation-constrained; in the final analysis, they are determined by the broader social context in which they happen, and they realize their goals in the conditions placed upon human action by that context" (Mey, 2001: 228).

The Pragmatic Turn

From the early 20th century on, the study of language had been defined, following Saussure, as the study of its system and structure. The methods for studying language were borrowed from the natural sciences; the rules that were assumed to govern the use of language were thought of as operating on the model of physical laws, being testable according to the prediction method: a hypothesis generates a statement about certain phenomena, and we can empirically ascertain whether or not the prediction holds. So, too, a rule in linguistics should correctly predict what happens in language, and it should be as general and simple as possible, while capturing all and only the facts.

This model of linguistic methodology (accepted by all those working in the structuralist tradition, from Bloomfield to Hjelmslev to Chomsky) was subsequently refined by the incorporation of mathematical and computational methods and techniques. Chomsky's main thesis, in particular, that a grammar of a language should be able to generate all the correct sentences of a language and none of the incorrect sentences, met with wide acclaim, and became the implicit code for much of linguistic work during the latter half of the last century.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, opposition to this mechanistic way of thinking about language arose from several quarters. Not only among the linguists, but mainly among the philosophers (Austin, Searle, and their followers) and anthropologists (Hymes, Hanks), among the sociologists and conversational analysts (Goffman, Sacks, Schegloff), the insufficiency of the standard linguistic method when it came to capture the full reality of human language use was keenly felt. Also among the literary theorists, following the rediscovery of the pioneering works of Soviet thinkers such as Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and others, the interest in the social aspects of language and its use in narration in particular became a prime factor in destabilizing the current linguistic paradigm, especially as embodied in the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* (*see* **Saussure, Ferdinand (-Mongin) de (1857–1913)**; **Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1895–1975)**; **Voloshinov, V. N. (ca. 1884/5–1936)**). In Western Europe, where the Russian scholars, for political reasons, had been rather poorly known, the surge of anti-establishment thinking of the 1960s and 1970s (spearheaded by a return to Marx) had a great impact on what we now can see and name as the pragmatic turn in language studies (*see* **Marxist Theories of Language**; **Social Aspects of Pragmatics**; **Literary Pragmatics**).

In order to properly understand the import of this turn, let's go back to the case of speech acts, referred to above. There are basically two ways of looking at human speech activity: one is to consider the language used, the other is to look at the situation in which the language is used. Clearly, the two aspects should not be separated: there is no language use except in situations, and no situation is complete without the language that goes with it. However, in a linguistics-oriented approach we will always start out with the words, then try to "fit them to the

world," as Searle used to say. The question is then: given these words, what can they do? If I say *Open the window, please*, what is the effect of this language use on the world (including the window in question, but also myself and my interlocutors, far and near)? In this approach, I start with the language and work my way to the outside, the world. The main focus in most cases is on the language used for ordering and the conditions that accompany this speech act.

Conversely, I may start out with a given situation: a window has to be closed. The question is: What language is appropriate, given the situation? I may say *Close the window, please* to somebody nearby; but I could also say, *Isn't it a bit cold in here?*, or any other indirect speech act that will do the job (sometimes even a grunt or a significant look will be sufficient). Rather than focusing uniquely on the words, pragmatics tries to capture the situation as a whole, and work its way to the inside, where the spoken words are found. Here, the use of language, such as a speech act, is an important part, but not the only one, of the situation.

In this, as in all use of language, the main protagonist is neither the language nor the situation, but the user and his or her situational conditions. The user decides on what language to use, but does this strictly in accordance with the situational context, as we saw above. Indeed, in many situations the use of a specific, canonical speech act is probably the user's last choice. One does not say *I hereby incite you to riot* to effectuate a speech act of inciting to riot – in fact, given a situation of inciting, almost any speech act will do, as Kurzon has remarked (1996). This line of thinking has led me to believe that the indirect speech act, as it is usually described, is not the exception but the normal case: all speech acts are situationally bound and conditioned, hence to a certain degree indirect in that they depend on the situation in which they are uttered.

In other words, a pragmatic approach to speech acting, and in general to language use, moves from the outside in: given this situation, what words will be appropriate for a particular act? In contrast, speech act theory, in its classical shape, works from the inside out (as does linguistics): given these words, how can I use them in a situation? This is basically the traditional semantic problem of the meaning of words; it is solved by trying to find a context in which the words will fit, rather than by starting out with the context and determining which words or expressions will fit a particular contextual slot. Curiously, it is this latter, textually based, prepragmatic approach to linguistics that was also the ideal of a structuralist like Hjelmslev: one starts from the entire text and arrives at the text's minimal constituent units through successive analytic operations; the problem was that in this kind of analysis, the user never was taken into account.

When we speak of a pragmatic turn, it is this kind of change of direction we have in mind. It is not just that some linguists turned to pragmatics, or even turned themselves into pragmaticists by fiat or "chosen affinity" (Goethe's expression). It is the method itself that has been turned on its head (or stood on its legs, if one prefers): rather than being a language-based operation, pragmatics advocates a user- and situation-based approach. It is also here that the relationship between semantics and pragmatics can be turned from an "unhappy marriage" if ever there was one (to borrow Georgia Green's expression, when she characterized the relationship between syntax and semantics; Green, 1989) into a healthy relation of mutual respect. Thus, the pragmatic turn in linguistics can be described as a shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax) to the paradigm of the language user. The latter notion is of particular importance for defining pragmatics, since it brings a number of observations to the same practical denominator (see below; cf. Mey, 2001: 4).

It is also in this sense that we can define pragmatics as "studying the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society" (Mey, 2001: 6). For, while it is true that communication in society chiefly is practiced by means of language, still, the language users, being social animals, can only use their language on society's premises. The social order controls and conditions communication in society; society controls and conditions people's access to the communicative means, in particular the linguistic ones. Given its focus on the human use of language and other communicative means, the proper task of pragmatics is to study how those societal conditions allow and determine such a use.

The Difference that Makes a Difference

A final question needs to be answered: given that we do have this pragmatic turn, and admitting that it is the right direction to take in our study of the human use of language, a question still lingers in ours minds, *viz.*: does it really mean that much which way we look at the relation between humans and their language, inside-out or outside-in? What I would like to show in this final section is that there is a difference, and that this difference indeed does "make a difference" (using Bateson's formulation).

First off, there is the emphasis that the outside-in approach places on the social aspect of all language

use. Placing the user in focus, as I advocate in the definition given above, reflects this primordial character of pragmatics as a societally based and societally conditioned study. This is not just to say that we look at social classes or groups, and then try to figure out what kind of (different) language and dialects they speak (the classical sociolinguistic approach, as practiced by, for example, William Labov and his school (*see* **Labov, William (b. 1927)**). In pragmatics, the concern is first of all to 'read' the user as a social *siglum*, a 'sign' to be decoded in accordance with societal parameters.

One of the first questions to ask then, is not what does this utterance mean? but how come this utterance could be produced at all? (Haberland and Mey, 1977, 2002) Asking the question in this way opens up an understanding of the speaker's and hearer's "affordances" (Mey, 2001: 220–221): what can a language user afford to say/hear/understand/execute as a speech act? Clearly, as already the original speech act theorists had seen, an order in the military or some other hierarchically organized body that is issued without proper authority is null and void. But even in more mundane situations (such as asking a simple question), one has always to think of what this question represents for the person who is asked to answer. Certain items may be tabooed in a particular culture; take for instance the proper name that is given a person in the Navajo community upon attaining adulthood, a name that is not to be divulged except to those with whom one has the greatest intimacy. Similarly, the old adage *De mortuis nil nisi bene* ('Say only good things about the dead') may reflect an age-old taboo: the dead may come back and take revenge when spoken about disrespectfully. The social norm, as expressed in what we now would call a superstitious belief, allows for certain types of speech and forbids the use of others, depending on the situation.

The importance of this point of view in, for instance, a teaching situation is enormous. Getting to know the background from which one's students speak is not only important in an inner city school with a majority of Black students (and often a sizable portion of White teachers), where the curriculum is geared towards White middle class values and White middle class ways of speaking and thinking are preferred (*see* **Classroom Talk**; **Class Language**). Pragmatics is also of help when trying to avoid language clashes, or even language wars, in which we construct linguistic and social differences as the barricades from which deadly battles are fought. In perhaps less serious cases, the educational future of whole generations is jeopardized because of the teachers' lack of understanding of their pupils' social and cultural background: in Botswana primary schools, students sit in the classroom and do "safe time" without learning anything useful, as Arthur (2001) has made clear; elsewhere, misunderstood language policies are imposed without regard to the students' needs (as superbly demonstrated by Canagarajah in his discussion of the language situation in Jaffna, Northern Sri Lanka; Canagarajah, 2001).

In a broader framework, one could raise the question of whether pragmatics is useful in situations like those experienced on a daily basis in the developed countries of Western Europe, where immigrants from poorer parts of the world arrived *en masse* during the 1960s and 1970s and will continue to pose problems of acculturation for many generations to come. The problems can basically be reduced to this dilemma: should people from other cultures be politely asked (or even forced) to leave their cultural baggage behind and dress up in the hosts' cultural garb, or should they be allowed (or maybe even forced) to set up their own cultural ghettoes, where they can live and breathe the familiar air of their home surroundings?

The problem hinges on a proper (that is, pragmatic) interpretation of the term 'culture' and its epiphenomenal adjective, 'intercultural.' Such a view bases itself on a pragmatic and mainly contextual understanding of culture. On the one hand, culture, in order to flourish, has to have a cultivating environment, a context; pragmatics, on the other hand, in order to be true to its definition, has to respect the individual's choice. As to the first point, no culture belongs exclusively to any individual or group of individuals; neither can culture be freely and noncontextually moved around. A culture presupposes a cultural environment, a growth context, just as the properly conditioned soil is necessary for a successful (agri)culture. But also, pragmatics as defined above is a theory of human behavior (linguistic and otherwise), which explicitly depends on, and is conditioned by, the profile of the user. Hence we must inquire as to what in the actual circumstances is culturally feasible and pragmatically desirable for the individual as well as for the group.

A great deal of flexibility is required in order to avoid either of the two extremes: the culture-only view, where one blindly focuses on a particular culture and wishes for its perpetuation, no matter what, and the pragmatic-only view, which defines the uses of language simply from a (mostly utilitarian) user point of view: what is needed to guarantee the immigrants a not only culturally, but also economically viable existence?

Through research and practice, the field of intercultural pragmatics tries to build a bridge between the two extreme positions; it safeguards the culture as culture while attending to the needs of the users.

Here, it should be borne in mind that cultures are not absolute or eternal values; even more important is the realization that humans are humans and have human needs that neither the cultural nor the pragmatic view should be allowed to abrogate. Among these needs belongs, first and foremost, the need to self-determine one's relationship to one's culture and to the culture of the host country. As pragmatic researchers, we should consequently steer a middle course between the extremes of pious romanticism and bone-hard realism, as I have indicated elsewhere (Mey, 2004) (*see* **Intercultural Pragmatics and Communication**).

Conclusion: 'Out of the Waste Basket'

From its humble beginnings as a place where one could deposit the unsolved (and perhaps unsolvable) problems that the classical parts of linguistic studies (such as syntax and semantics, perhaps even phonology) wanted to get rid of, at least temporarily, to the present state of pragmatics as a fully fledged representative of the linguistic disciplines, not much time has elapsed.

Forty odd years ago, the famed Israeli linguist Yehoshua Bar-Hillel (1971) coined the catchy phrase that figures at the head of this section; in his opinion, pragmatics served as a temporary stop for all the things that syntax and semantics could not deal with: a kind of linguistic waste basket. Now, not so many decades later, the waste basket has served its function – I am not saying it is quite empty yet, but we have managed to upgrade the basket to a more prominent position, and accorded it descriptive and explanatory status as a recognized field of language studies.

The relationship between pragmatics and the other linguistic disciplines, especially semantics and pragmatics, may still give rise to heated dispute (cf. what is said above; *see* **Pragmatics and Semantics**; **Phonetics and Pragmatics**), but nobody today would deny pragmatics its place in the sun. Moreover, pragmatic studies have diversified themselves into such various fields as second language education (*see* **Interlanguage**) and educational settings in general, questions of gender-based language use and language discrimination (*see* **Gender and Language**), the intercultural dilemma of assimilation vs. ghettoization (*see* **Intercultural Pragmatics and Communication**), the struggle for linguistic rights and the fight against linguistic imperialism (*see* **Linguistic Rights**; **Pragmatics: Linguistic Imperialism**; **Linguistic Decolonization**; **Minority Languages: Oppression**; **Multilingualism: Pragmatic Aspects**), and so on. Even recent developments in the area originally known under the label of human–computer interaction have begun to recognize the impact of pragmatic thinking (*see* **Cognitive Technology**; **Adaptability in Human-Computer Interaction**).

What this shows is first that pragmatics is not a unified discipline in the sense that it acknowledges a unique method and focuses on only one object. Second, the diversity of the areas where pragmaticists are active is best captured if we consider pragmatics not to be an independent component of linguistics (on a line with, say, semantics or syntax) but rather as a perspective on the way we study language – a perspective that at the same time informs our study of human interaction in the direction outlined above. As the British pragmaticist Norman Fairclough has observed, the pragmatic perspective being a critical one, it examines and states "the conditions under which interactions of a particular type may occur" (Fairclough, 1995: 48) – interactions that include speech acting, conversational interaction, language use in institutional settings, the discourse of literature, the prescribed language use in schools and other official surroundings, the language of sexual oppression and counter-oppression or emancipation, the fight for linguistic rights, and so on and so forth. Fairclough continues: "such a statement cannot be made without reference to the distribution and exercise [of power] in the institution and ultimately, in the social formation," that is, in society at large. (Fairclough, 1993: 48; Mey, 2001: 320–321). On the notion of perspective, see further Haberland and Mey (1977: 21), Verschueren (1999: 7), and Mey (2001: 9–11) (*see* **Power and Pragmatics**; **Critical Language Studies**).

See also: Adaptability in Human-Computer Interaction; Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1895–1975); Class Language; Classroom Talk; Cognitive Technology; Context Principle; Cooperative Principle; Deixis and Anaphora: Pragmatic Approaches; Gender and Language; Intercultural Pragmatics and Communication; Interlanguage; Labov, William (b. 1927); Linguistic Decolonization; Linguistic Rights; Literary Pragmatics; Marxist Theories of Language; Maxims and Flouting; Minority Languages: Oppression; Multilingualism: Pragmatic Aspects; Phonetics and Pragmatics; Pragmatic Acts; Pragmatic Presupposition; Pragmatics and Semantics; Pragmatics: Linguistic Imperialism; Relevance Theory; Saussure, Ferdinand (-Mongin) de (1857–1913); Social Aspects of Pragmatics; Speech Acts; Speech Acts and Grammar; Speech Acts: Definition and Classification; Voloshinov, V. N. (ca. 1884/5–1936).

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Prague School

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The Prague linguistic circle was founded in 1926 and the Prague school, which it represented, was soon acknowledged as having systemized phonology. Its members played a crucial role in several basic branches of linguistics. A characterization of the school was presented by Vachek (1964, 1966) and by Leška (1995, 1996), see also Sgall (1997) and especially Vachek's (1960) *Dictionary,* published in English by Dušková (2003) with the inclusion of Čermák and Hajičová (2003), where relevant bibliographical data can be found. The School formulated its findings neither in a unified framework nor in a fully explicit way, but they were fruitful and still offer many substantial starting points for a systematic description of language as an essentially interactive system. Even earlier the main founder of the school, Mathesius (1911) analyzed issues of synchronic variation; having found inspiration with O. Jespersen, F. Brunot, A. Marty, and others. Ideas of the Moscow school and of the Russian formalists were brought to Prague by R. Jakobson.

The earlier prevailing Neogrammarian views, with their basically diachronic understanding of language, were changed toward what was best specified by F. de Saussure in his program of a synchronic