WHAT IS PRAGMATICS?

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DEFINITION

A subfield of linguistics developed in the late 1970s, pragmatics studies how people comprehend and produce a communicative act or speech act in a concrete speech situation which is usually a conversation (hence *conversation analysis). It distinguishes two intents or meanings in each utterance or communicative act of verbal communication. One is the informative intent or the sentence meaning, and the other the communicative intent or speaker meaning (Leech, 1983; Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to as pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997) which often includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit.

FOCUS AND CONTENT

Some of the aspects of language studied in pragmatics include:

--Deixis: meaning 'pointing to' something. In verbal communication however, deixis in its narrow sense refers to the contextual meaning of pronouns, and in its broad sense, what the speaker means by a particular utterance in a given speech context.

--Presupposition: referring to the logical meaning of a sentence or meanings logically associated with or entailed by a sentence.

--Performatives: implying that by each utterance a speaker not only says something but also does certain things: giving information, stating a fact or hinting an attitude. The study of performatives led to the hypothesis of Speech Act Theory that holds that a speech event embodies three acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

--Implicature: referring to an indirect or implicit meaning of an utterance derived from context that is not present from its conventional use.

Pragmaticians are also keen on exploring why interlocutors can successfully converse with one another in a conversation. A basic idea is that interlocutors obey certain principles in their participation so as to sustain the conversation. One such principle is the Cooperative Principle which assumes that interactants cooperate in the conversation by contributing to the ongoing speech event (Grice, 1975). Another assumption is the Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983) that maintains interlocutors behave politely to one another, since people respect each other's face (Brown & Levinson 1978). A cognitive explanation to social interactive speech events was provided by Sperber and Wilson (1986) who hold that in verbal communication people try to be relevant to what they intend to say and to whom an utterance is intended.
The pragmatic principles people abide by in one language are often different in another. Thus there has been a growing interest in how people in different languages observe a certain pragmatic principle. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies reported what is considered polite in one language is sometimes not polite in another. Contrastive pragmatics, however, is not confined to the study of a certain pragmatic principles. Cultural breakdowns, pragmatic failure, among other things, are also components of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Another focus of research in pragmatics is learner language or *interlanguage. This interest eventually evolved into interlanguage pragmatics, a branch of pragmatics which specifically discusses how non-native speakers comprehend and produce a speech act in a target language and how their pragmatic competence develops over time (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kasper, 1995). To date, a handful of cross-sectional, longitudinal and theoretical studies on classroom basis have been conducted and the potentials along the interface of pragmatics with SLA research have been widely felt. Topics of immediate interest to which language teachers at large may contribute seem just numerous. What are some of the pragmatic universals underlying L2 acquisition? What influences L1 exerts on the learner's L2 acquisition? How shall we measure the learner's pragmatic performance with a native pragmatic norm? These are but a few of the interesting ones and for more discussions see Kasper & Schmidt (1996), Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1996), Takahashi (1996), House (1996) and Cohen (1996).

**HISTORY**

Although pragmatics is a relatively new branch of linguistics, research on it can be dated back to ancient Greece and Rome where the term pragmaticus’ is found in late Latin and pragmaticos’ in Greek, both meaning of being practical’. Modern use and current practice of pragmatics is credited to the influence of the American philosophical doctrine of pragmatism. The pragmatic interpretation of semiotics and verbal communication studies in Foundations of the Theory of Signs by Charles Morris (1938), for instance, helped neatly expound the differences of mainstream enterprises in semiotics and linguistics. For Morris, pragmatics studies the relations of signs to interpreters’, while semantics studies the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable’, and syntactics studies the formal relations of signs to one another.’ By elaborating the sense of pragmatism in his concern of conversational meanings, Grice (1975) enlightened modern treatment of meaning by distinguishing two kinds of meaning, natural and non-natural. Grice suggested that pragmatics should centre on the more practical dimension of meaning, namely the conversational meaning which was later formulated in a variety of ways (Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983).

Practical concerns also helped shift pragmaticians' focus to explaining naturally occurring conversations which resulted in hallmark discoveries of the Cooperative Principle by Grice (1975) and the Politeness Principle by Leech (1983). Subsequently, Green (1989) explicitly defined pragmatics as natural language understanding. This was echoed by Blakemore (1990) in her Understanding Utterances: The Pragmatics of Natural Language and Grundy (1995) in his Doing Pragmatics. The impact of pragmatism has led to crosslinguistic international studies of language use which resulted in, among other things, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory which convincingly explains how people comprehend and utter a communicative act.
The Anglo-American tradition of pragmatic study has been tremendously expanded and enriched with the involvement of researchers mainly from the Continental countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Belgium. A symbol of this development was the establishment of the IPrA (the International Pragmatic Association) in Antwerp in 1987. In its Working Document, IPrA proposed to consider pragmatics as a theory of linguistic adaptation and look into language use from all dimensions (Verschueren, 1987). Henceforward, pragmatics has been conceptualized as to incorporate micro and macro components (Mey, 1993).

Throughout its development, pragmatics has been steered by the philosophical practice of pragmatism and evolving to maintain its independence as a linguistic subfield by keeping to its tract of being practical in treating the everyday concerned meaning.

**CRITICISMS**

A traditional criticism has been that pragmatics does not have a clear-cut focus, and in early studies there was a tendency to assert those topics without a clear status in linguistics to pragmatics. Thus pragmatics was associated with the metaphor of 'a garbage can' (Leech, 1983). Other complaints were that, unlike grammar which resorts to rules, the vague and fuzzy principles in pragmatics are not adequate in telling people what to choose in face of a range of possible meanings for one single utterance in context. An extreme criticism represented by Marshal (see Shi Cun, 1989) was that pragmatics is not eligible as an independent field of learning since meaning is already dealt with in semantics.

However, there is a consensus view that pragmatics as a separate study is more than necessary because it handles those meanings that semantics overlooks (Leech, 1983). This view has been reflected both in practice at large and in Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics by Thomas (1995). Thus in spite of the criticisms, the impact of pragmatics has been colossal and multifaceted. The study of speech acts, for instance, provided illuminating explanation into sociolinguistic conduct. The findings of the cooperative principle and politeness principle also provided insights into person-to-person interactions. The choice of different linguistic means for a communicative act and the various interpretations for the same speech act elucidate human mentality in the relevance principle which contributes to the study of communication in particular and cognition in general. Implications of pragmatic studies are also evident in language teaching practices. Deixis, for instance, is important in the teaching of reading. Speech acts are often helpful for improving translation and writing. Pragmatic principles are also finding their way into the study of literary works as well as language teaching classrooms.

(See also: communicative competence, sociolinguistics as a source of discipline, psycholinguistics as a source of discipline, competence and performance, discourse analysis, interlanguage, negotiation of meaning, sociolinguistic/sociocultural competence, procedural/declarative knowledge)
REFERENCES


Shi Cun (1989) 'Speeches at the IPrA Roundtable Conference' (1, 2,3), Xi'an: Teaching Research Issues 2,3,4.


Further reading


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