

This book is specifically designed for the student in English, linguistics and sister departments who needs to complement his lecture notes with a handy, yet comprehensive, textbook that presents a survey of language studies in a manner that shows how causally connected the different components of language study are, in addition to detailed exposition of the basic concern of each of these components. Each contributor has carefully endeavoured to define and explain his topic using an approach that facilitates understanding. Ample examples drawn from the Nigerian environment as a second language situation make *Studies in English Language* more relevant than foreign texts of similar concern.

Studies in English Language seeks throughout to equip the general reader and the specialist with the techniques for his or her own examination of linguistic and social functions of the English language in an EL₂ situation today. It is a compulsory reader.

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Chapter Four

Pragmatics: Some Basic Principles and Procedures

Wale Adegbite

Introduction

The term 'pragmatics' originates in philosophical studies, but it has been widely used in several disciplines, both scientific and humanistic. In many tertiary institutions around the world pragmatics is taught as a course in linguistic studies in various departments of linguistics and language (both foreign and indigenous). As a course in linguistics, pragmatics is related to language studies and its relevance to interpretation of utterances of language is explored. Pragmatics is studied as part of semantics, if the latter is concerned with the wider consideration of meaning as cognitive meaning plus social and contextual meaning. But if semantics is conceived in the narrow sense of cognitive meaning alone, then pragmatics will complement semantics to cater for the remaining aspects of meaning. Although it has its own specific focus, pragmatics does not preclude the study of phonology, syntax, lexis and cognitive semantics. However, it is assumed that all of these can be properly catered for elsewhere.

The importance of pragmatics to language studies is that it enables scholars and students to understand the principles and procedures guiding the interpretation of socio-cultural and contextual meanings of utterances. In the discussion below we describe certain terms, principles and procedures of the pragmatics of language while exemplifying the discussion with some English utterances.

The Concept of Pragmatics

The scope of pragmatics as an area of language studies is a wide one. According to Levinson (1983) because its scope covers both context-dependent aspects of language structure, and principles of language usage and understanding that have little to do with linguistic structure, it may be difficult to forge a definition that will cover both of these aspects. Despite this, however, scholars in the area (Bach and Hamish 1979, Wilson and Sperber 1981, Leech 1983 and Thomas 1983 among others) generally explain that pragmatics accounts for the specific meanings of utterances in particular social and situational contexts, unlike semantics which accounts for the general (dictionary) meanings of sentences. In particular, Leech and Short (1981:290) write:

The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.

In a wide conception of language as a general theory of sign systems, pragmatics is recognised as one of the three inter-related levels of semiotics, viz- syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. While syntax relates signs to one another, semantics relates signs to their real objects and pragmatics relates signs to users of a language (Morris 1946).

Leech (1983) divides linguistics into grammar-semantics (the ~~decontextualized formal system of language~~), and pragmatics (the use of language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer). Leech's grammar-semantics and pragmatics distinction can be equated, at least in part, with the distinction between 'sentence meaning and 'utterance (or speaker) meaning'. Speaker meaning utilizes pragmatics principles to:

- assign sense and reference to the speaker's words (level 1 meaning).
- assign force or value to the speaker's words (level 2 meaning).

Thomas (1983:92) illustrates the application of levels 1 and 2 speaker meaning above to interpret the utterance below.

Ex. 1

She missed it.

If the utterance were uttered in reply to 'Why didn't Elsie come on the earlier

train?', pragmatic principles would allow one at level 1 to determine that 'she' refers to 'Elsie' 'it' refers to the earlier train, and 'missed' has the sense 'failed to catch'. If however, it were uttered in reply to 'How did Grandma manage without the car?', 'she' would refer to 'Grandma', 'it' would refer to 'the car' and 'missed' would have the sense 'felt the lack of'. At level 2, pragmatic principles would allow one to assign force to the utterance, e.g. criticism or disapproval or commiseration, or a combination of some or all of these.

It will be noticed that the utterance above is interpreted in context. A pragmatic meaning must always be contextualized, where the context is verbal, cultural and situational. In contrast, the interpretation of the utterance in terms of sentence meaning would, because of lack of context, reveal:

- (i) lack of definite referents and sense to 'she', 'missed' and 'it';
- (ii) a general description of the items in metalinguistic (i.e. phonological, syntactic and lexical) terms.

Thomas (1993) also opines that it is possible to understand or misunderstand utterances at either or both of levels 1 and 2 above. She uses the following illustrations to support her opinion

Misunderstanding at level 1 (Failure to understand the proposition which speaker has expressed).

Ex. 2

A: (to fellow passenger on a long-distance coach) Ask the driver what time we get to Birmingham.

B: (to driver) Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham please?

Driver: Don't worry, love, it's a big place - I don't think it's possible to miss it!

In this case, the driver understood that B's utterance was a request for information (Level 2) but misunderstood the intended sense (Level 1) of 'when'.

Misunderstanding at level 2 (Failure to understand the intended pragmatic force of speaker's utterance)

Ex. 3

A: Is this coffee sugared?

B: I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In this case, B interprets A's utterance as a genuine request for information rather than as A intended, a complaint (Gloss: As usual, you've forgotten to sugar it), the intended effect of which was to elicit an apology and offer to fetch the sugar.

The two levels are, of course, closely linked, and the hearer's failure at level 1 to understand which proposition has been expressed may make it impossible for him/her to understand the force.

Ex. 4

Lecturer (addressing me): Have you seen Leo?

I was not able, even in context, to decide whether he was using 'seen' in the sense of:

- a set eyes on (in which case the force would be a request for information. Gloss: Where is Leo?)
- b spoken to (in which case the force could be a request for information, criticism or reproach requiring explanation or apology. Gloss: Have you spoken to Leo as I told you to do, and if not, why not?)

Some Pragmatic Principles and Procedures

The aim of pragmatic theory is to explain how it is that speakers of any language can use the sentences of that language to convey messages which do not bear any necessary relation to the linguistic content of the sentence used (Kempson 1977). Pragmatics studies generally assume that participants in a discourse do not rely only on their knowledge of language system in their interactions. Instead, they require a combination of the knowledge of language system, the knowledge of the world, the knowledge of cultures and conventions of people and knowledge of the factors of situations in which communication takes place. It is the concern of pragmatics to make explicit some of the processes and procedures by which participants activate relevant aspects of all these kinds of knowledge in communicative interaction. The discussion below will examine some of the basic concepts of pragmatics under the following sub-headings: tactics, context of utterance, knowledge of the world, conversational principles, speech acts, the functions of language and pragmatic failure.

Tactics

This pertains to the procedure and means of interpreting the discourse value of an item. Such a value is arrived at in the context of communication based on the interaction of the item with other linguistic items, which precede, follow or are expected to follow the items, and some other non-linguistic factors of communication. As an example, a question is often used for eliciting response from another participants, but its occurrence does not always perform this questioning act, e.g. the rhetorical question

Also, the tactical knowledge of participants prevent them from assuming a one-to-one correspondence between forms and functions of utterance. A declarative may not always be a statement; an interrogative may not be a question; and an imperative may not be a command, or even a request. For example, the study of journalists' interviews of politicians by Ofordi (1994) reveals instances where sentence forms do not predict functions of utterances.

Ex. 5

Journalist: I read it from *The Guardian* that you are seeking election into an office.

Politician: Did you read that?...

In 'Si' a journalist uses a declarative sentence to ask a question. Although the politician is constrained by the nature of the interaction (an interview) to answer the question, he does not give an answer immediately. Instead, he asks a question through an interrogative. It is not clear, however, whether this interrogative is intended to clarify the journalist's earlier assertion or intended as a directive or reproach to the journalist.

Tactics, thus, enable participants in a discourse to not only consider the linguistic (or verbal) context of discourse but also the social and situational contexts in order to achieve the required result of matching linguistic item with appropriate functions while speaking or interpreting. See Adegbija (1995) for a practical illustration of the term 'tactics' in discourse studies.

Context of Utterance

The term 'context' is an abstract category used by language scholars to provide links between linguistic items and the social and situational factors of communication. There are two kinds of context recognised in language study: verbal and situational contexts. Each of these is explained below.

The Verbal Context

The verbal context still falls within the purview of linguistics. But it refers to the company which a linguistic item keeps. In other words, interpreting in a verbal context contrasts with the procedure of considering verbal items in isolation while it emphasizes interpretation of such items in terms of their linkage and relationship with one another. A consideration of verbal context interpretation inevitably reduces the instances of syntactic or lexical ambiguity that may be found if items are considered separately (see Ex 1).

The Situational Context

Unlike the verbal context, the situational context falls mainly within the purview of pragmatics. The situation is divided into the context of culture and immediate context. The context of culture (Firth, 1962) specifies the conventional or socio-cultural rules of behaviour which participants must share before they can communicate successfully with each other. Some of these conventional rules may be universal in application while some are culture-specific. Sometimes, different societies may also have different orientations towards certain universally-formulated conventional rules. Conventional rules guide the use of linguistic utterances, paralinguistic devices (e.g. gestures and nodding) and non-lexical vocal devices (e.g. laughter, clicks and hisses) in different societies. Some societies have more elaborate greeting systems than others. Also, a nodding may mean 'yes' in a society, while it means 'no' in another.

Knowledge of conventional rules brings up the ideas of 'common-sense' knowledge (Garfinkel, 1967) and 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972; Bell, 1976). These ideas enlighten us about how participants establish and maintain socialization in communicative interaction. A child normally learns the values and pre-occupations of its culture largely by learning the language, according to Roger Fowler (1986:19):

... language is the chief instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person is, willy-nilly, moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into which s/he happens to be born...

Communicative competence implies the ability of participants in an interaction to relate linguistic forms with the social norms and situational features in order to interpret utterance correctly.

A good illustration of the above concepts is given by the interpretation of ironical utterance (Adegbite, 1996a). While a child should recognise the threat in the following sentence, he is not expected to interpret it literally:

Ex 6

Father (to children): As soon as I get out, you can start your wild play, scatter everything in the house, then when I come back, I shall commend you.

Another example can be asked in form of quiz as follows

Ex 7

A friend looks rather ugly to you after having just applied a heavy make-up. She walks confidently to you, smiling, and asks you "How do I look?". What answer could you give her?

Etiquette provides that a positive remark is required here, even if the listener will later correct one or two faults of the make-up.

The immediate or 'context of situation' (Malinowsky, 1923, Firth, 1962) specifies the component which describe the specific circumstances in which communication takes places pertaining to time, place, events ad other conditions. Features activated by participants from these components influence the production and interpretation of utterance.

The components of situation have been presented in various ways by linguists (Firth, 1962; Ellis, 1988; Halliday, 1978 and Hymes, 1962); the presentation of Hymes (1962) is considered and adopted very briefly below.

Hymes (1962) proposes a taxonomy of situation components which he neatly reduces to the acronym SPEAKING as follows:

<i>Setting and scene</i>	This refers to the general physical circumstances in which the communication event takes place, including the time, period, place, weather conditions and cultural view of the setting.
<i>Participants</i>	This describes the status, roles and relationship between/ sender/addresser, on the one hand, and hearer/receiver/ addressee, on the other hand. The speaker-hearer denotes participants in a speech event; sender-receiver denotes participants in both speech and non-fictional writing (i.e., real author and real reader); addresser-addressee denotes the implied author and implied reader of fictional texts.
<i>Ends</i>	This refers to outcomes of speech act, which can be classified into (i) results – intended and/or unintended, and (ii) goals – individual and/or general.
<i>Act Sequence</i>	This refers to the form and content of the message of text: how and what is said, 'words' and the 'topic
<i>Key</i>	This describes the manner in which a textual message is conveyed, e.g. the lecture might be delivered in a precise way or perhaps in a light-hearted way.
<i>Instrumentalities</i>	These are the channels employed in communication and the forms of speech. e.g. telephone, telegram, face-to-face, E-mail etc.

<i>Norms</i>	This refers to conventions or rules of social and speech behaviour: linguistic, paralinguistic and non-linguistic. Conventions may be universal or may be specific to cultures of participants.
<i>Genre</i>	Genres are categories which can be fairly identified through the linguistic forms they typically employ, e.g. poem, letter, story, etc.

The presentation above integrates components of both context of culture and context of situation

The Functions of Language

Specialists in linguistics sometimes claim that if non-specialists are asked what the function of language is, they will reply that it is 'to send information' or 'to tell other people your thoughts'. People are not as simplistic as this; even a moment's reflection leads to the conclusion that language has many more functions

There have been many, sometimes conflicting, attempts to classify the main functions of language - 'macro-functions'. One of the clearest and most influential was formulated by the linguist, Roman Jakobson (1960), and further developed by Hymes (1962). The scheme proceeds, generally, by first identifying the elements of communication, as follows:

<i>The addresser</i>	the person who originates the message. This is usually the same as the person who is sending the message
<i>The addressee</i>	the person to whom the message is addressed
<i>The channel</i>	the medium through which the message travels: sound waves, mark on paper, telephone wires, word processor screens, etc.
<i>The message form</i>	the particular grammatical and lexical choices of the message
<i>The topic</i>	the information carried in the message
<i>The code</i>	the system of communication – the language or dialect, e.g., Swedish, Scottish English, Sign Language, etc
<i>The setting</i>	the social or physical context. Microfunctions are then established; each focusing attention upon one element, as shown below.

ASPECT	FUNCTION
Addresser	Emotive, Expressive, Affective
Addressee	Conative (Directive, Vocative)
Context	Referential, Cognitive, Denotative
Message	Poetic (Aesthetic)
Contact	Phatic, Interaction Management
Code	Metalinguistic

The emotive function: communicating the inner states and emotions of the addresser (Oh no!, Unbelievable!, Ah!, Bullshit!, exclamations and expressions of attitudes)

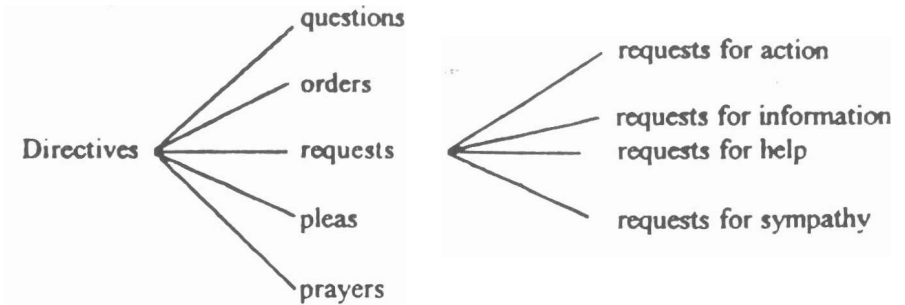
The conative function: focus is on the person(s) addressed. Most typical of this function is the use of vocatives and imperatives to call the attention of another or requiring them to carry out some action (John!, Get out, Forgive us our sins, I'm warning you, etc.).

The phatic function: opening the channel or checking that it is working either for social reasons (Good day, Fine day, is it? Are you listening? Wait a minute!, Now, ...).

The poetic function: in which the particular form chosen is the essence of the message (The rhyme 'Father Fred fried five fat fresh fish for five foolish friends from France' illustrates this focus on form).

The metalinguistic function: focusing attention upon the code itself, to clarify it or negotiate it. (In the phrase 'The structure of modern English', 'structure' is the headword, 'the' is the modifier, and 'of modern English' is the qualifier.)

If we accept Jakobson's (1960) and Hymes' (1962) categorization of language into a small number of macro-functions, we might then go on to subdivide each function and specify more delicate categories, or micro-functions (acts). Consider the following probable breakdown of the directive function by Cook (1989:27):



Functional Development in Communication

It is interesting to speculate, if one accepts this classification, on the evolution of functions in each human individual. The crying baby is being expressive, although her cries are not really language at all, but instinctive reactions to environment. When she realises that by controlling these cries, and producing them at will rather than automatically, she can influence the behaviour of her parents, she has progressed to the directive function. Phatic communication begins very early. Chuckling, gurgling and babbling often have no function but to say: 'Here I am, and so are you' (Halliday 1975). The poetic function is also apparent at an early stage: when young children latch on to a phrase and repeat it endlessly, without conveying any information. The referential function gains its prominence only at a later stage, and the metalinguistic function also comes later; these latter two are the functions on which a considerable amount of attention is lavished at school. Surprisingly, a good deal of foreign language teaching begins with the metalinguistic function, by explicitly stating the rules of grammar.

Knowledge of the World

Participants in a communication are able to interact efficiently because they share some knowledge of the world which normally they do not repeat in the communication. When a speaker assumes that the hearer has knowledge of a particular information, he either omits the information totally from his message or expresses it by means of presupposing items. Presupposing items include the pronouns 'he/she/it/they' and the article 'the', which refers to items mentioned previously or assumed in an utterance. Leech (1974:298) gives the following example.

Ex 8

- i) The book you stole from the library is interesting. (Assertion)
- ii) When did you steal the book from the library? (Question).
- iii) See that you take back the book you stole from the library (Command).
- iv) What an interesting book you stole from the library! (Exclamation)

(All the examples 'i-iv' above carry the presupposition that the hearer stole 'a book' from 'a library'.)

Here is another example:

Ex 9

I am the youngest male child of my parents.

This presupposes:

- i) My parents have more than three children
- ii) My parents have both male and female children
- iii) My parents have a female child, or female children, who are younger than me.

Also, in the communication process, the hearer does not wait for speaker to finish his utterance before he begins to decode the utterance. Instead, based on his previous knowledge, he makes inference of the content of the text from bits of utterances long before the speaker finishes. Since an inference is made through guessing, it may be right or wrong (Brown and Yule, 1983). Consider the following example:

Ex 10

- i) Esther goes to school every day ...

A hearer may infer from this bit that Esther is a pupil or a teacher. But if the speaker further adds:

- ii) She is always very punctual at school. She never allows any staff to get to school before her...

the hearer then modifies his earlier stand from pupil to teacher. If the speaker finally says:

- iii) That is one way she is able to control her staff.

then consequent upon the last part of the utterance, the hearer can finally interpret that Esther is a headmistress. It is observed that the hearer modifies his inferences to incorporate every bit of information he gets from every additional utterance made by the speaker

Knowledge Structures

Observations from studies in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence have shown to us how human beings know about the world and how this knowledge is stored in their brains. Some information available make us aware that human beings' knowledge of the world is represented in their brains in form of mental structures called 'schemata'.

Schemata is the plural word for 'schema'. It refers to either 'the totality of items of knowledge in the brain' or 'the totality of items activated in relation to a particular topic in a communication process'. Each schema denotes items of knowledge that are associated with an object, person, event, action, place, etc. For example, the schema of a house will include 'windows, roof, rooms, furniture' and other related concepts such as 'build, live, sleep' among others. Also, the knowledge of 'car' activates such items as 'driver', 'drive', 'journey', etc. It is said that items of knowledge that relate to an object are stored close to one another in the brain so that the choice of a topic activates several items of knowledge that are related to the topic

As soon as a speaker begins to produce an utterance, the listener's mind, stimulated by key words or phrases in the utterance, activates knowledge schemata that relate to the topic. Such activation enables the listener to make inferences and make predictions of information content of the text long before the speaker finishes (Ex 10). The speaker, being aware of the knowledge possessed by the listener, avoids details which are considered unnecessary. Cook (1989:69) gives the following example

Ex 11

- (i) I woke up at seven forty. I made some toast and a cup of tea. I listened to the news. And I left for work at about 8.30
- (ii) I woke up at seven forty. I was in bed. I was wearing pajamas. After lying still for a few minutes, I threw back the duet, got out of bed, walked to the door of the bedroom, opened the door, switched on the landing light, walked across the landing, opened the bathroom door, went into the bathroom, put the basin plug into the plug-hole, turned on the hot tap, ran some water into the wash basin, looked in the mirror

Imagine that either of the texts above were uttered by a witness in a court case who is asked to tell the court about her movements in the morning. The description in (i) might well be enough to satisfy the court, while we might not be surprised if the judge interrupted the witness uttering (ii) and accused her of being facetious and wasting time.

Thus, in order to achieve relevance in communication, the speaker has to balance the supply of new information with economy of expression. Sperber and Wilson (1986) indeed say that relevant information is that which yields the greatest change in the hearer's knowledge for the least processing effort. While successful communication gives new information, it also works within the framework of the receiver's assumptions.

Conversational Principles

Grice, a philosopher, argues that in all communication there is a general agreement of cooperation between a speaker and a hearer which enables them to make inference and interpret a text as coherent beyond the linguistic forms of utterances. Consider the following set of utterances

Ex 12

- A: I'm very hungry.
 B: My car has broken down
 C: Sorry, I better see Mr L

Both A and B are able to link the proper functioning of the car to the solution of the hunger. A is hungry and needs to get to a restaurant to get food to eat. B understands the A's utterance as a request for A to make use of B's car to get to the restaurant.

Ex 13

- X: It's hot in here.
 Y: (Switches on the fan)
 X: Thank you.

Both X and Y recognise the fact that the fan would provide solution to X's complaint. And even though X does not specifically mention a fan, Y makes a correct inference from the former's utterance.

Grice (1975) claims further that to enhance this cooperation participants normally obey some conventional principles, or 'maxim's, which he terms 'cooperate principles'. The conversation conventions which support the cooperative principle are stated in four terms, thus:

- Quantity: (1) Make your contributions as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

- Quality: (1) Do not say what you believe to be false
 (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
 Relation: Be relevant
 Manner: Be perspicuous
 (1) Avoid obscurity
 (2) Avoid ambiguity
 (3) Be brief
 (4) Be orderly } Be clear

Note that the above maxims are stated as universal conventions; different cultures may prompt different orientations of people towards them. For example, the maxim 'Be brief' or 'Be relevant' may not relevantly apply to some occasions in the African society, i.e. in settling quarrels or at ceremonies where speakers can speak for several minutes before making a point, in order to respect the faces of participants. Also, the maxim of adequate quantity may have a different orientation in societies where women are forbidden to talk much even when they know a lot about a matter

To a great extent, conversation is sustained by the normal observation of the above principles. One expects, for example, that the people one is talking to are telling the truth; conversation would not follow the pattern they do if every statement made was assumed to be false.

But it is a well-known fact that these conventions are flouted, which provides the basis for the flexibility in communication. Many occasions when the conventions are broken, the participants still cooperate, believing that their partners are telling the truth. But there are also occasions when the norms are deliberately and flagrantly broken to the extent that the speaker knows and intends that the hearer should recognise that a maxim has been broken. The hearer then has two alternatives to choose from. One is to react sharply against the violation. The other is to accept the violation, and thus try to interpret the implied meaning. Such an applied meaning conveyed by the speaker and interpreted by the hearer is what is covered by the term 'implicature'. A good example of an implicature can be seen in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* (p.20), thus:

Ex 14

- ELESIN: And that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast I knew so well?
 IYALOJA: Has one step already in her husband's home.
 ELESIN: (Irritated) Why do you tell me that?

In the extract above, Elesin requests for the marriage of a girl who is betrothed to another man, and Iyaloja gives information about the status of the girl. In the sociocultural setting of the play, Elesin's requests are not expected to be questioned; thus, he sees Iyaloja's information as a kind of unnecessary excuse and a breach of the maxim of 'quantity'. Note that one major condition for the working out of an implicature is that the speaker-hearer must share certain assumptions about the world relevant to the communication situation.

It is interesting to discuss the implications in the conversations below, examining what maxims of cooperation are broken in the utterances.

Ex 15

- (i) S: I want to give a job to K as an English teacher in my school and I understand he was your student. Please advise me based on his performance in class.
T: K was a good footballer and he always did well in history. He had good character and was always punctual.
- (ii) X: I gave your wife a cheque to give your yesterday. I hope she did.
Y: No comment.
- (iii) C: How much is your plantain?
D: Two hundred and fifty naira.
C: What of one hundred and fifty?
D: Where is the money?
C: A hundred and twenty naira?
D: Bye-bye.

The Politeness Principles

The politeness principles, like the cooperative principle, may be formulated as series of maxims which people assume are being followed in the utterance of others (Cook, 1989). As with the cooperative principle, any flouting of these maxims will take on meaning, provided it is perceived for what it is. The linguist, Robin Lakoff (1973), has formulated these maxims as follows:

- Don't impose.
- Give options.
- Make your receiver feel good.

These maxims of the politeness principle explain many of those frequent utterances in which no new information is communicated. My neighbour said 'I'm sorry. I saw you were home' in an attempt to mitigate the imposition she was making. In English we often give orders, and make requests and pleas

(directives) in the form of elaborate questions (Would you mind ...? Could you possibly ...? May I ask you to ...?) which give the option of refusal, we apologise for imposing (I'm sorry to bother you) and add in praise to make our hearer feel good (You know much more about car engines than I do...). Clearly, the politeness principle and the cooperative principles are often in conflict with each other.

Politeness and truth are often mutually incompatible (how do you answer a friend who asks whether we like her new hairstyle, for example?) and so are politeness and brevity. These conflicting demands of the two principles are something of which people are consciously aware. In English, there is even a term for the surrender of truth to politeness: 'a white lie.'

Can you identify which maxims of cooperation and politeness are being obeyed or flouted?

Ex. 16

A new teacher has gone to his headteacher's office. The headteacher is extremely busy preparing for a meeting. The young teacher speaks first.

A: Excuse me, are you busy?

B: No, not at all.

A: I wonder if I could have a word with you.

B: Can we talk here?

A: Yes, oh yes. You see, I need your advice, as a more experienced person than I.

Ex. 17

A student enters into a lecturer's office and makes a request.

S: I want to sign my form Sir.

L: (refuses to collect the form) Go ahead and sign it.

Speech Acts

Inferring the function of what is said by considering its form and context is an ability which is essential for the creation and reception of coherent discourse and thus for successful communication. The principles of politeness and cooperation are not on their own enough to provide the explanation for this inference. To explain this, we also need knowledge of the physical and social world. We also need to make assumptions about the knowledge of the people with whom we are interacting. An approach which tries to formulate how such knowledge is brought into play is 'speech acts theory'.

Thus, in order to achieve relevance in communication, the speaker has to balance the supply of new information with economy of expression. Sperber and Wilson (1986) indeed say that relevant information is that which yields the greatest change in the hearer's knowledge for the least processing effort. While successful communication gives new information, it also works within the framework of the receiver's assumptions.

Conversational Principles

Grice, a philosopher, argues that in all communication there is a general agreement of cooperation between a speaker and a hearer which enables them to make inference and interpret a text as coherent beyond the linguistic forms of utterances. Consider the following set of utterances

Ex 12

- A: I'm very hungry.
 B: My car has broken down
 C: Sorry, I better see Mr. L

Both A and B are able to link the proper functioning of the car to the solution of the hunger. A is hungry and needs to get to a restaurant to get food to eat. B understands the A's utterance as a request for A to make use of B's car to get to the restaurant.

Ex 13

- X: It's hot in here.
 Y: (Switches on the fan)
 X: Thank you.

Both X and Y recognise the fact that the fan would provide solution to X's complaint. And even though X does not specifically mention a fan, Y makes a correct inference from the former's utterance.

Grice (1975) claims further that to enhance this cooperation participants normally obey some conventional principles, or 'maxim's, which he terms 'cooperate principles'. The conversation conventions which support the cooperative principle are stated in four terms, thus:

- Quantity: (1) Make your contributions as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

- Quality: (1) Do not say what you believe to be false
 (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
 Relation: Be relevant
 Manner: Be perspicuous
 (1) Avoid obscurity
 (2) Avoid ambiguity
 (3) Be brief
 (4) Be orderly
- } Be clear

Note that the above maxims are stated as universal conventions; different cultures may prompt different orientations of people towards them. For example, the maxim 'Be brief' or 'Be relevant' may not relevantly apply to some occasions in the African society, i.e. in settling quarrels or at ceremonies where speakers can speak for several minutes before making a point, in order to respect the faces of participants. Also, the maxim of adequate quantity may have a different orientation in societies where women are forbidden to talk much even when they know a lot about a matter

To a great extent, conversation is sustained by the normal observation of the above principles. One expects, for example, that the people one is talking to are telling the truth; conversation would not follow the pattern they do if every statement made was assumed to be false.

But it is a well-known fact that these conventions are flouted, which provides the basis for the flexibility in communication. Many occasions when the conventions are broken, the participants still cooperate, believing that their partners are telling the truth. But there are also occasions when the norms are deliberately and flagrantly broken to the extent that the speaker knows and intends that the hearer should recognise that a maxim has been broken. The hearer then has two alternatives to choose from. One is to react sharply against the violation. The other is to accept the violation, and thus try to interpret the implied meaning. Such an applied meaning conveyed by the speaker and interpreted by the hearer is what is covered by the term 'implicature'. A good example of an implicature can be seen in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* (p.20), thus:

Ex 14

- ELESIN: And that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast I knew so well?
 IYALOJA: Has one step already in her husband's home.
 ELESIN: (Irritated) Why do you tell me that?

The speech acts theory provides some means of accounting for language in use. The formulation of the theory recognises three kinds of acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. In the explanation by Lyons (1977:730) a locutionary act is an act of saying: the production of a meaningful utterance (the utterance of certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain sense and a certain reference). The locutionary act refers to the formal and literal meaning of an utterance. An illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something. The act refers to the intended meaning of a speaker, e.g.: making a statement, promise, command or request, asking a question, threatening, praising, greeting, christening a baby, etc. A perlocutionary act refers to the effect of an utterance on the listener, e.g.: making someone to believe that something is so, persuading someone to do something, moving someone to anger, consoling someone in distress, etc. The three-fold distinction above is summarized by Kempson (1977:51) thus

... a speaker utters sentences with a particular meaning (locutionary act) and with a particular force (illocutionary act), in order to achieve a certain effect (perlocutionary act) on the hearer.

Illocutionary acts are the central object of study of speech acts. The force of these acts may be said to be explicit (overt) or implicit (covert). Explicit acts are exemplified by performative utterances which directly perform speech actions, e.g.:

Ex 18

- (i) I promise you that I'll be at the station
- (ii) I name this child Esther Aderonke

Such utterances in English include first-person singular subject and a present-tense verb denoting some speech act such as name, bet, order, etc. In contrast to the above, implicit acts describe and imply actions rather than perform them, e.g.:

Ex 19

- (i) I'll be at the station.
- (ii) I promised you that I'll be at the station.

While explicit acts can be tested in terms of whether they are appropriate or not, implicit acts can be tested to be true or false.

Searle (1969) examines the conditions under which the performance of speech acts may be appropriate or inappropriate. For example, he states the

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conditions ('felicity conditions') for a promise as:

- a. the utterance refers to some future act of the speaker
- b. the speaker would not normally be carrying it out
- c. the speaker recognises he has taken on a responsibility

Cook (1989:35) gives the following examples

The utterance 'I sentence you to death' performs the function of sentencing someone to death. However, the sentence succeeds in having this function of sentencing if certain external conditions are fulfilled. The words must be uttered by someone with the necessary authority in a country in which there is a death penalty, to a person convicted of a particular crime; they must be spoken, not written, at the right time (at the end of a trial) and in the right place (in court)

Furthermore, Cook (1989:38-39) gives a list of felicity conditions for different directives acts thus:

1. The sender believes the action should be done
2. The receiver has the ability to do the action
3. The receiver has the obligation to do the action
4. The sender has the right to tell the receiver to do the action
5. The sender refers to an action necessary for a particular goal
6. The sender refers to an action necessary if the receiver is to avoid unpleasant consequence.
7. The sender refers to an action which will benefit the receiver.
8. The sender refers to an action which will benefit the sender.
9. The sender possesses knowledge which the receiver lacks
10. The sender cannot carry out the action referred to

The first four conditions above are those for the act of ordering.

Can you identify which of the conditions will apply to advice, appeal, pray, and warn? What felicity conditions can you suggest for the following acts: thinking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating and threatening

Pragmatic failure

Pragmatic failure here refers to the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said' (Thomas 1983). It is a case of misinterpretation of utterances in communicative interaction, which sometimes causes communication breakdown. So far, the discussion above has centred on the pragmatic principles

and procedures that are employed by participants to correctly interpret meaning and thus achieve success in interaction. However, since communicative interaction is not wholly a story of pragmatic success but also an account of incidents of pragmatic failure, it is appropriate at this juncture to examine briefly some of the factors responsible for failure in communication.

First, one reason why misinterpretation occurs is the inadequate mastery of the language system. Lack of knowledge of pronunciation structures, or sufficient vocabulary for communication can inhibit production or reception of utterance. Such inadequacies are further compounded by some inherent problematic areas of meaning in language such as vagueness, ambiguity and polysemy (see Ex 1 and 2).

The inability to properly match the forms of utterances with functions is another cause of pragmatic failure (see Ex 3). A hearer who lacks adequate knowledge of use of intonation in English may erroneously interpret 'Good morning' uttered with a 'rise-fall' tone as a warm greeting (appropriate tone is 'low-rise') instead of, probably, a rebuff. Also, many users of English interpret as questions normal English request forms such as 'Can you show me the way?'

Lack of knowledge of conventional rules guiding speech or social behaviour is also a cause of pragmatic failure. For example, a literal interpretation of an ironical utterance is a case of misinterpretation. Also, in some societies, it is an older person who first offers a handshake during greeting to a younger person; a breach of this convention portrays lack of etiquette.

Pragmatic failure can also arise from a lack of (or mismatch of) knowledge of some objects or people in the world. For example, the attribution to people of such stereotypes as 'the weaker sex', 'the abrasive Russian/German', 'the obsequious Indian/Japanese', 'the bloody African', or 'the savage', 'the standoffish Briton' and 'the insincere American' prejudice or opinions about such people and may influence how we relate to them and how we are ready to adjust and cooperate with them during communication.

Lastly, lack of cooperation between speaker-hearer is another cause of pragmatic failure. Non-cooperation between participants may be demonstrated through deliberate violation of conversational principles, especially the politeness principle. Social difference or other human factors may prevent speakers from making concessions that may enhance efficient communication. In legal disputes, there is sometimes deliberate misinterpretation of statutes to suit litigants' purposes (Adegbite 1996). In this regard, minor differences in meanings of words or cases of polysemy and ambiguity are amplified beyond normal proportions.

Conclusion

Pragmatics has been described in this study as an area of linguistics that is concerned with interpreting utterances by relating their meanings to the users and social situations. In such interpretations, the relevance of such basic concepts as tactics, knowledge of the world, conversational principles, speech acts, functions of language and pragmatic failure has been recognised. It is crucial that students understand these concepts as well as the principles and procedures guiding the utilization of these concepts.

It is important to recognize that the discussion on pragmatics here has only been introductory. Within the limited space available, it has been able to highlight and discuss some major issues on which there seems to be consensus in pragmatic studies. However, it is hoped that an understanding of these issues will lead students to venture further into the field and explore the more complex and controversial issues in it.

Suggestions for further reading

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