PRAGMATICS

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INTRODUCTION

> An operational definition of an insecure science is: a science whose leaders say they are in quest of a paradigm, or have just found a paradigm. (Hacking 1995: 352)

Over the past thirty years or so pragmatics has grown into a well-established, 'secure', discipline in institutional terms. There are a number of specialist journals (Journal of Pragmatics, Pragmatics, Pragmatics and Cognition, Multilingua, as well as others), there is at least one major professional organization (The International Pragmatics Association) whose membership goes into thousands, and regular international conferences are held the world over. Yet despite these achievements, pragmatics remains a good example of an insecure science in terms of Hacking's definition. None of the many pragmatic theories and frameworks comes close to being a generally accepted paradigm, and in fact, there is no consensus as to the domain of pragmatics. Nevertheless, most people working in the field would probably not disagree with some interpretation or other of the suggestion, put forward by Charles Morris (1938: 30), that pragmatics is "the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters". In other words, pragmatics is concerned not with language as a system or product *per se*, but rather with the interrelationship between language form, (communicated) messages, and language users. It explores questions such as the following:

- How do people communicate more than what the words or phrases of their utterances might mean by themselves, and how do people make these interpretations?
- Why do people choose to say and/or interpret something in one way rather than another?
- How do people's perceptions of contextual factors (e.g. who the interlocutors are, what their relationship is, and what circumstances they are communicating in) influence the process of producing and interpreting language?

Pragmatics thus questions the validity of the code-model of communication that was developed within the discipline of semiotics. In the code-model, communication is seen as an encoding-decoding process, where a code is a system that enables the automatic pairing of messages (i.e. meanings internal to senders and receivers) and signals (i.e. what is physically transmitted (e.g. sound, smoke signals, writing) between the sender and the receiver). According to this view, communication is successful to the extent that the sender and the receiver pair signals and messages in the same way, so that the message broadcast in the form of a given signal is identical to the one received when that signal is decoded. The code model has the merit of describing one way in which communication can be achieved (e.g. between machines, or bees), but it is wholly inadequate as an account of how people actually communicate (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95, Chapter One). Modern approaches to pragmatics recognize that human communication largely exploits a code (a natural language such as English, German or Japanese), but they also try to do justice to the fact, illustrated in the next section, that human communicative behaviour relies heavily on people's capacity to engage in reasoning about each other's intentions, exploiting not only the evidence presented by the signals in the language code, but also evidence from other sources, including perception and general world knowledge.

In a brief chapter like this, it is impossible to explain properly the many topics that are usually studied within pragmatics, and the various different approaches that are taken within the field. So our goal is to provide a taster to these topics and issues and the methods used to study them, to show how pragmatic concerns have relevance to areas of applied study such as foreign language teaching, and to suggest references for follow-up reading.

PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE USE

This section uses a brief (authentic) dialogue in order to introduce some important terms and concepts in modern pragmatics and to illustrate briefly the sorts of phenomena that pragmatics needs to account for.

A Sample Dialogue

Situation: Kiki and Sharon are students at a British University. They have been flatmates for a short time and do not know each other very well. Kiki is Greek and Sharon is English. Sharon is getting ready to go out.

[1] Kiki: Where are you going tonight?

[2] Sharon: Ministry.

[3] Kiki: Ministry?

[4] Sharon: Ministry of Sound. A club in London. Heard of it?

[5] Kiki: I've been clubbing in London before.

[6] Sharon: Where to?

[7] Kiki: Why do you want to know?

[8] Sharon: Well, I may have been there.

[9] Kiki: It was called ‘The End’.

[10] Sharon: Nice one!

[11] Kiki: I hope you have a good time at the Ministry.

(contributed by Kelly-Jay Marshall)

Pragmatic Meaning

It is often (though not universally) assumed that the task of *semantics* is to describe and explain linguistic meaning (i.e. what a given utterance means by virtue of the words used and the ways in which they are put together), whereas pragmatics is concerned with the study of the meaning that linguistic expressions receive in use. So one task of pragmatics is to explain how participants in a dialogue such as the one above move from the decontextualised (i.e. linguistically encoded) meanings of the words and phrases to a grasp of their meaning in context. This process can involve several aspects:

- the assignment of reference; e.g. what does *Ministry* [line 2] stand for (technically, refer to)?
- figuring out what is communicated directly; e.g. what does *Nice one* [line 10] mean in this context?
- figuring out what is communicated indirectly, or implicitly; e.g. what does Sharon intend to imply when she asks *Heard of it?* [line 4]?; what is the illocutionary force of Kiki’s interrogative utterance: *Where are you going tonight?* [line 1]?

In our sample dialogue, the process of handling these pragmatic issues sometimes goes smoothly, but sometimes it does not (as is typical of real life). Let us consider each of them in turn.

Assigning Reference

Kiki starts by asking Sharon where she is going, but Sharon’s one-word answer is not informative enough for Kiki to be able to figure out what Sharon is actually referring to. Sharon’s utterance takes it for granted that the name ‘Ministry’ has a referent (in other words, it presupposes the existence of a referent), but Kiki’s general world knowledge is insufficient for her to identify the specific referent that Sharon intended for ‘Ministry’ in this context. Only upon further clarification (requested in [3] and given in [4]), is Kiki able to work out that, by saying ‘Ministry’ ([2]), Sharon intends to convey something like: I am going to a London club called ‘Ministry of Sound’. So, there is a gap between the decontextualised meaning of the utterance (roughly, what the word ‘Ministry’ means according to the dictionary) and the thought expressed by that word (roughly: a London club called ‘Ministry of Sound’). Kiki needs to bridge this gap, and initially fails to do so. In other words, a listener needs to assign reference to the words that a speaker uses, and since there is no direct relationship between entities and words, the listener typically has to make inferences as to what the speaker intends to identify. If this inferencing process is too difficult, communication will falter, and so to be cooperative, a speaker needs to anticipate how much information the listener will need. As Yule (1996: 22) points out, reference 'is not simply a relationship between the meaning of a word or phrase and an object or person in the world. It is a social act, in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identify an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended'.

The process of assigning reference also involves the interpretation of ***deictic expressions***. These are linguistic items that point to contextually salient referents without naming them explicitly. There are several types of deictic expressions in the dialogue: person deictics (e.g. the personal pronouns *you* ([1], [7]), *it* ([4], [9]), *I* ([5], [8], [11]), place deictics (e.g. *there* ([8]), and time deictics (e.g. the tensed forms of the verbs). In context, they refer to particular people/things, places, and moments in time, respectively, but on different occasions they pick out different referents. For example, when Sharon says *I may have been there* [8], the deictic *there* refers to the particular club in London which Kiki has visited. But, when used on another occasion, the same word will refer to some other place.

Figuring out what is communicated directly

Sometimes the process of identifying pragmatic meaning (i.e. contextually determined aspects of utterance meaning) involves interpreting ambiguous and vague linguistic expressions in order to establish which concepts and thoughts they express. For example, in line [10] Sharon says *Nice one*. This could be taken to mean that a particular previously mentioned thing is nice (in this context, the London club called 'The End'), but this expression also has another conventionalised (and somewhat vague) meaning, roughly: *Good idea, or Well done*. In this dialogue, it is unclear whether Kiki has interpreted the phrase in one way rather than another, or whether she treats both interpretations as possible.

These observations show that the meaning of an utterance is not fully determined by the words that are used: there is a gap between the meaning of the words used by the speaker and the thought that the speaker intends to represent by using those words on a particular occasion. More technically, the linguistic meaning of an utterance underdetermines the communicator's intended meaning. This gap is filled by the addressee's reasoning about what the communicator (may have) intended to communicate by his or her utterance. Hence, pragmatics plays a role in explaining how the thought expressed by a given utterance on a given occasion is recovered by the addressee (see Carston, 2004).

Figuring out what is communicated indirectly

The main import of an utterance may in fact easily lie, not with the thought expressed by the utterance (i.e. with what is communicated directly) but rather with the thought(s) that the hearer assumes the speaker intends to suggest or hint at. More technically, it lies with what is implicated, or communicated indirectly. For example, in line [4] Sharon asks

Heard of it?, indicating that information about whether Kiki has heard of the club in question is desirable to her. However, Kiki interprets Sharon's question as evidence that Sharon considers her incompetent or inadequate in the social sphere. Therefore, she responds to (what she takes to be) the implicit import of Sharon's utterance ([5]), rather than giving the information explicitly requested. So, pragmatics needs to explain how indirectly (i.e. implicitly) communicated ideas (in this case: *Sharon thinks Kiki is socially incompetent and/or inadequate*) are recovered.

By far the most influential solution to this problem was developed in the mid 1960s by the Oxford philosopher Paul Grice (1967; 1989). He argued that people are disposed to presume that communicative behaviour is guided by a set of principles and norms, which he called the *Co-operative Principle* and maxims of conversation.

The Co-operative Principle

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Grice 1989: 26

Deriving an interpretation that satisfies the Co-operative Principle is effected through four maxims which the communicator is presumed to abide by:

▪ **Truthfulness** (communicators should do their best to make contributions which are true)

▪ **Informativeness** (communicators should do their best to be adequately informative)

▪ **Relevance** (communicators should do their best to make contributions which are relevant)

▪ **Style** (communicators should do their best to make contributions which are appropriately short and clearly expressed).

Grice's Maxims

Grice labelled the maxims using terms which are, perhaps, less intuitive: *quality*, *quantity*, *relation* and *manner*, respectively. Grice's fundamental point was not that people always observe these maxims, but rather that they are unstated assumptions that underlie communication. So if a speaker clearly flouts one or more of the maxims (e.g. by giving a very brief answer when a more informative one is expected), the speaker may be prompting the listener to look for a meaning that is different from (or additional to) the meaning that is verbally expressed; in other words, to work out the *conversational implicature*.

Grice's approach provides a reasonably neat account of implicated (i.e. indirectly communicated) meaning. For example, what might Kiki mean by saying *I've been clubbing in London before* ([5])? Superficially it might seem that her answer is not relevant. However, given the context set by the exchange up to that point, and assuming that Kiki is trying to be co-operative, informative, relevant and concise, it seems clear why Sharon would be justified in concluding that Kiki implicates (i.e. intends to imply) that she is familiar with the London club scene, that she is generally socially competent, and the like. Nevertheless, Grice's theory has a number of limitations; for example, it does not incorporate the impact of social/interpersonal factors which influence the participants' preferences and goals (see below), and are important in explaining why Kiki interprets Sharon's question *Heard of it?* [4] as questioning her social competence; nor does Grice's approach explain the fact that context plays an extremely important role in determining the thought expressed by an utterance. In other words, it does not explain pragmatic aspects of what is communicated directly.

The challenge of describing and explaining the reasoning processes involved in communication has also been taken up by cognitive approaches to pragmatics, such as Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) relevance theory, which maintains that the reasoning processes involved in communication are constrained by a single principle: the principle of relevance, making the Co-operative principle and the maxims of quality (truthfulness), quantity (informativeness) and manner (style) redundant. On this view, human cognition is designed in such a way that people generally tend to be on the lookout for new information worth having. When we produce communicative acts, such as utterances and texts we indicate to their intended recipients (hearers, readers) that these acts warrant their attention; that if they mentally represent and process what we have said or written, they will get enough information worth having without wasting their mental effort. So, according to the communicative principle of relevance, an act of communication (such as an utterance, text, or pointing gesture) makes evident a tacit guarantee that it is informative enough to be worth mentally representing and processing. For example, when deciding how much information to give in response to Kiki's first question [1] *Where are you going tonight?* Sharon needs to work out what sort of information Kiki would like to have, how much information of this type she is interested in having, and how this information can be conveyed most effectively (i.e. simply, without putting Kiki to gratuitous expenditure of mental processing effort). In this instance, Sharon's one word reply ([2] *Ministry*) falls short of conveying enough desirable information to Kiki, who is left wondering about the likely reasons for this.

Another perspective on meaning in communication focuses on the distinction between the linguistic form of the utterance and its communicative function (technically, the *illocutionary force*) of that utterance in the communication situation. The philosopher John Austin (1975) generated, and another philosopher of language John Searle (1969) developed the view that language should be seen as a form of action – that when we speak, we 'do' things like make requests, make statements, offer apologies, and so on. Austin's initial insight was that people do not simply make statements that can be judged as 'true' or 'false'; rather they use language to perform actions (such as requesting information, promising, offering, betting, etc.) that have an impact in some way on the world. Both he and Searle tried to classify speech acts into different categories, and to identify the *felicity conditions* that enable a speech act to be performed 'successfully'. Let us consider Kiki's first question again: [1] *Where are you going tonight?* Under what circumstances is it appropriate to ask another person a question? Under what circumstances is it appropriate to ask people for factual information of the type requested by Kiki? Was she requesting information? Is it possible that she used the (interrogative) form of words which is standardly used for asking questions, because she intended to hint that she wanted to be invited out with Sharon? Or was she perhaps criticising Sharon for going out too much? In other words, what was her intention in using an interrogative utterance, or more technically, what was the illocutionary force (request for information (?), suggestion/hint (?)) of Kiki's interrogative utterance? While speech act theory looks at these questions by focusing on the relation between linguistic form (e.g. interrogative) and communicative function (e.g. request for information) Grice's approach aimed to answer them in terms of the co-operative principle, the maxims of conversation and contextual knowledge.

Explaining the Impact of Social Factors

Grice's (1989) theory of conversation, and in particular his view that conversation is governed by a set of norms, pointed to the importance of investigating the social regularities which arise through and are reflected in communicative interaction. Relevance theory takes the view that such social factors which influence communication are best analysed as part of the context (the set of assumptions which participants use in producing and interpreting acts of communication), so they do not need to be taken account of by positing special mechanisms (e.g. additional principles or maxims). In contrast to the cognitive framework of relevance theory, work within social pragmatics has sometimes led to the introduction of additional communicative norms. For example, Leech (1983) maintains that the *Politeness Principle* is a necessary supplement to Grice's Co-operative Principle, arguing that people often break the Co-operative Principle for 'politeness' reasons; in other words, 'to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place' (Leech, 1983:82). Leech proposes a set of *politeness maxims*, such as the *modesty maxim* and the *agreement maxim*, which operate in conjunction with the cooperative maxims. They are worded as 'rules' (e.g. minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self; minimize disagreement between self and other, maximize agreement between self and other), but in fact they aim to describe the interactional principles that underlie language use. Leech (1983) also suggests that language use involves a *pragmalinguistic* perspective and a *sociopragmatic* perspective. This distinction is a useful one that has been widely adopted, although it can be fuzzy at times.

The pragmalinguistic perspective focuses on the linguistic strategies that are used to convey a given pragmatic meaning, while the sociopragmatic perspective focuses on the socially-based assessments, beliefs and interactional principles that underlie people's choice of strategies. For example, suppose I am a dinner guest and want to reach the salt which is placed at the other side of the table. I have various options available: I could stand up and reach for it, I could say 'Pass the salt, will you', or 'Can you pass the salt, please', or even 'I like my food quite salty'.

A sociopragmatic perspective focuses on the social judgements associated with such a scenario; for example, what the relationship between the participants is (e.g. close or distant, equal or unequal), and the social acceptability of reaching for food in such a context. A pragmalinguistic perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the linguistic strategies used to operationalise the request: for example, whether it is a direct request ('Pass the salt, will you'), a conventionally indirect request ('Can you pass the salt please?') or a non-conventionally indirect request ('I like my food quite salty'). Thomas (1983) suggests that when there is a mismatch in people's sociopragmatic conventions (e.g. one person thinks it is acceptable to say 'sorry' and stand up and reach for the salt, whereas someone else does not), sociopragmatic failure can occur, and that when there is a mismatch in people's pragmalinguistic conventions (e.g. one person typically uses a direct request in this context, whereas another person typically uses a conventionally indirect request), pragmalinguistic failure can occur.

One of the most influential models that tries to explain the impact of social factors on people's use of language is Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) face model of politeness. Brown and Levinson define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61), and they draw a distinction between positive face and negative face. Positive face reflects every person's need that his/her self-image is appreciated and approved of, and negative face reflects every person's "basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (1987: 61). So, for example, Kiki's question [1] *Where are you going?* could be interpreted by Sharon as an infringement of her personal preserves, or in other words, as a threat to her negative face. This threat may well have been aggravated by the fact that Sharon was getting ready to go out and was too busy or preoccupied to engage in small talk with Kiki. But, in a more general sense, every utterance is potentially an imposition on the hearer, because, by producing the utterance, the speaker indicates that s/he requests the hearer's attention. Clearly, the request for attention may be justified if the information communicated by the utterance is actually desirable to the hearer. But when the speaker requests information from the hearer, as Kiki did in line [1], her request for Sharon's attention may easily be taken as an imposition, because the information requested is seen as desirable to Kiki, rather than to Sharon, who is asked to supply it. Various forms of 'polite' linguistic behaviour have developed precisely to show that the speaker acknowledges the imposition (and, possibly, that she would consider herself in the hearer's debt, if the latter decided to accept the imposition). Examples in English include expressions such as: *I know I'm interrupting you, but...*, *Could you ...*, *I'd be grateful if ...*, and many others.

A face interpretation can also be given to Sharon's question [4] *Heard of it?*. Kiki interprets this question as a challenge to her social competence, or in other words, as a threat to her positive face. In fact, Sharon may not have meant it in this way, but Kiki may be particularly sensitive to positive face threats of this kind since she is a foreigner (a Greek student in Britain) and may be insecure as to whether she has been accepted as a member of the local youth culture.

The fact that the two interlocutors are from different cultural backgrounds raises further possibilities. It could be that they have slightly different conventions for initiating small talk. In some languages (e.g. Chinese), a question like *Where are you going?* is a phatic remark which is not really meant to be treated as a request for information, but rather is meant simply as a superficial friendly remark, similar to the way in which we routinely say *How are you?* in English without expecting a detailed or particularly truthful response. However, this 'cultural difference' explanation is unlikely to be satisfactory in Kiki's case, as this type of question is not commonly used as a phatic remark in Greek. So perhaps the rather 'clumsy' start to the conversation is a reflection of Kiki's uncertainty as to how to start a conversation appropriately in English with someone she does not know very well.

Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) argue that speakers take three main variables into account when deciding how to word a face-threatening utterance such as a request or a challenge: 1) the power differential between hearer and the speaker (i.e. amount of equality/inequality, labelled P), 2) the distance–closeness between them (labelled D), and 3) the degree of imposition of the content of the utterance (confusingly labelled R for rank). They maintain that other things being equal, the greater the power differential, the greater the distance, and the greater the imposition, the more careful and more indirect the speaker will be. In our sample conversation, the interlocutors are equal, and the content of Kiki's initial request [1] *Where are you going tonight?* is not particularly imposing. So in many respects we would not expect her to phrase it particularly diplomatically. On the other hand, the two of them do not know each other very well, so we might have expected a slightly more tentative remark such as *Going anywhere special tonight?* Perhaps Kiki's direct question *Where are you going tonight?* reflected the Greek tendency to use positive politeness strategies (i.e. to use 'approach oriented' strategies that assume a certain level of closeness), in contrast to the British tendency to use negative politeness strategies (i.e. to use 'imposition acknowledgement' strategies) to people they do not know well (cf. Sifianou 1992). Or perhaps she was doing this strategically to try and build up her friendship with Sharon.

Conversational Patterns and Structure

Conversational patterns such as those in lines 6 – 9 have been studied extensively within the framework of conversation analysis (see DISCOURSE ANALYSIS). This is an approach that starts from the commonsense observation that people take turns in conversation, and that relies on descriptions of naturally occurring data to discover the rules involved in the patterning of conversational exchanges. In this view, conversation proceeds through ordered pairs of utterances, called adjacency pairs. The utterances in a pair are ordered, in that the first member of a pair requires a second member. For example, a question requires an answer. Within the framework of conversation analysis, one would say that the adjacency pair consisting of the question in line [6] and the answer in line [9] is interrupted by another adjacency pair ([7] and [8]), thus forming an insertion sequence. Conversation analysis is really an approach to discourse analysis; however, patterns such as insertion sequences can also be analysed from a pragmatic perspective, in which case factors such as 'face' are included to try and explain why such patterns occur. On the other hand, pragmatists working within other frameworks, such as Sperber and Wilson's (1986/95) cognitive-psychological approach, would argue that the patterns observed by conversation analysts follow from general principles of human cognition and communication. They would, therefore, dispute the need for and the plausibility of turn taking rules and most of the apparatus of conversation analysis.

The Role of Context

In all approaches to pragmatics, context plays a major role in the communication process, and so an important task for pragmatic theory is to elucidate this process (Verschueren 1999). As pointed out in the section on Pragmatic Meaning, context contributes both to what is communicated directly and to what is communicated indirectly. In social pragmatics, it is widely accepted that the following features of the situational context have a particularly crucial influence on people's use of language:

- the participants: e.g. their roles, the amount of power differential (if any) between them, the degree of distance–closeness between them, the number of people present;
- the message content: e.g. how 'costly' or 'beneficial' the message is to the hearer and/or speaker, how face-threatening it is, whether it exceeds or stays within the rights and obligations of the relationship;
- the communicative activity (such as a job interview, a lecture, or a medical consultation): how the norms of the activity influence language behaviour such as right to talk or ask questions, discourse structure, and level of formality

Brown and Levinson's (1987) three variables, P, D and R have been particularly widely used in social pragmatic studies, and have been manipulated in various ways to try and find out how they influence language use.

Unfortunately, context is sometimes taken to be the concrete aspects of the environment in which an exchange takes place and that have a bearing on the communication process. But in pragmatics, a more psychological notion of context is crucial. The physical environment (e.g. the time, the place, and the objects and people present) does not impinge directly on utterance production and interpretation; it does so only indirectly via people's representations of it. For example, if you do not want your colleague in the next office to hear what you are about to say, you may speak in a low voice. However, your decision to speak in this way depends not so much on whether your colleague is actually in the next office or not as on your beliefs about his/her possible presence and ability to overhear your conversation. So in pragmatics, context can be defined as the set of assumptions (i.e. mental representations capable of being true or false) that have a bearing on the production and interpretation of particular communicative acts.

One of the main problems of pragmatics is to explain the constant updating of contextual assumptions in the course of a communicative exchange. For instance, in the conversation between Kiki and Sharon, Kiki probably begins the conversation with the belief that Sharon considers her to be socially competent. Following her request for clarification in line [3], she abandons this background contextual assumption, because she thinks that she has displayed her lack of essential social knowledge about the London club scene. The continuation of the conversation is influenced by Kiki's newly formed contextual assumption that Sharon considers her socially inadequate. In fact, the role of some linguistic items is precisely to help the addressee – they point to the right contextual assumptions (i.e. those that the communicator intends the addressee(s) to exploit in the interpretation). For example, in the conversation, Kiki says that she has been clubbing in London before ([5]); Sharon asks her which London club(s) she has been clubbing in ([6]), and Kiki (who assumes that Sharon's question implicates that she does not believe her statement in line [5]), asks ([7]) *Why do you want to know?* Sharon's answer ([8]) begins with the word *well*, whose function is, roughly, to indicate that the answer that follows should not be interpreted in the context which Sharon presumes is most salient to Kiki; in this case, a set of assumptions about Sharon's doubts as to whether Kiki has really been clubbing in London. In effect, the word *well* means something like: *Do not interpret the utterance introduced by* well *in the way in which the speaker thinks you are most likely to interpret it*. So, the word *well* does not contribute to what Sharon intends to say, but rather helps Kiki access the right context for the interpretation of the utterance which follows. Linguistic elements like *well*, *anyway*, *however*, *but*, *so*, *after all*, which help the addressee to contextualise what is said by the utterance, are called semantic constraints on implicatures (see Blakemore 1987). Other authors (e.g. Mey 2000) consider them to be similar to adverbials such as *obviously*, *unfortunately*, and the like, which do not contribute to the thought expressed by the utterance, but rather provide a comment on the speaker's attitude towards that thought. For example, imagine an Arsenal football club supporter saying: *Unfortunately, Manchester United will win the Premier League again*. This utterance expresses a thought that describes a state of affairs (technically called a *proposition*), and at the same time it includes the speaker's attitude towards that state of affairs. Hence, a comment like: *That's not true*, would be taken as challenging the claim: *Manchester United will win the Premier League*, not as disputing the Arsenal supporter's attitude towards that statement.

PRAGMATICS RESEARCH: PARADIGMS AND METHODS

As the section above implies, there are two broad approaches to pragmatics, a cognitive-psychological approach and a social-psychological approach. Cognitive pragmaticists are concerned with fundamental questions such as: *What is communication?* and *How is communication possible?* They are primarily interested in exploring the relation between the decontextualised, linguistic meaning of utterances, what speakers mean by their utterances on given occasions, and how listeners interpret those utterances on those given occasions. Social pragmaticists, on the other hand, tend to focus on the ways in which particular communicative exchanges between individuals are embedded in and constrained by social, cultural and other contextual factors. These two approaches tend to use different research paradigms and methods. Generally speaking, work within social pragmatics tends to take an empirical approach, and emphasizes the collection of pragmatic data, partly for descriptive purposes, and partly so that existing theories (e.g. Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) face model of politeness) can be tested and if necessary modified. Work within the cognitive-psychological tradition, on the other hand, is less concerned with large-scale data collection, and instead tends to theorize from specific examples of communicative utterances. In fact, many key pragmatic insights were developed within philosophy; Austin, Searle and Grice, for example, were all philosophers.

In terms of data collection, pragmatics borrows from other sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and thus uses a variety of methods. For example, it uses video/audio-recording and detailed field notes to collect on-line discourse, such as authentic conversations, elicited conversations, and role-played interactions; and it uses questionnaires, diaries and interviews to obtain off-line pragmatic data in which participants report, discuss and/or comment on their use of language. Some methods are more suitable than others for exploring given research questions, so it should not be thought that one method is necessarily always better than another. Moreover, the different methods can provide useful complementary information and perspectives and thus help to ensure *triangulation* (the use of two or more different methods focusing on the same research question so that complementary and converging data can be obtained and that the conclusions can be more robust). For instance, discourse data (obtained by recording an authentic interaction) can usefully be supplemented by post-event interview data in that participants can often provide rich and illuminating insights into their use of language in the recorded interchange. They may describe a sociocultural principle that is important to them, for example, or they may comment how they felt when someone said a particular thing.

The collection of on-line data brings into focus the problem of the Observer's Paradox: the concern that the interactants' awareness of being observed and recorded for research purposes may actually affect their communicative behaviour and thus distort the primary research data. Many researchers have found that any such effect tends to be temporary, but as Kasper (2000: 320) points out, "since initial observer effects are quite possible, researchers should refrain from the get-your-data-and-run type of data collection".

Despite their thematic and methodological differences, the cognitive-psychological and the social approaches to communication should be seen as complementary. For example, the realization of communicative directness–indirectness in different cultures is an important topic in social pragmatics, yet socio-pragmatic descriptions can benefit from a characterization of the reasoning processes involved in direct and indirect communication. Roughly, the more complex the reasoning involved in deriving a communicated assumption, the more indirectly communicated that assumption will be. For example, although the utterance *Could you pass me the salt?* has the form of a request for information about the hearer's ability to pass the salt, it is routinely (perhaps conventionally) used as a request that the hearer pass the salt to the speaker. Hence, the interpretation of *Could you pass me the salt?* as a request for action does not involve a complex reasoning process, and its meaning of *request for passing the salt* is not communicated very indirectly. In contrast to more or less conventionalized indirect requests like this one, an utterance such as *I like my food salty* is not routinely used as a request that the hearer perform the action of passing the salt, so deriving this interpretation will involve a rather more complex reasoning process. Hence, *I like my food salty* is a more indirect request for action than *Could you pass me the salt?*.

The distinction between direct and indirect communication is closely related to the observation that information may be communicated more or less strongly/weakly. The stronger (i.e. more conclusive) the evidence the communicator presents for intending to communicate a particular assumption, the more strongly communicated that assumption will be, and vice versa. For example, when Kiki asks *Where are you going tonight?*, her utterance, by virtue of its linguistic form, presents Sharon with conclusive evidence that some information about Sharon's plans for the evening is relevant to Kiki. In other words, it communicates strongly a request for information. The same question presents far less compelling evidence as to Kiki's purpose in asking the question: *Kiki is genuinely interested in Sharon, Kiki is trying to avoid the embarrassment of silence, Kiki wants to show that she considers Sharon a friend, Kiki is lonely and is hoping that Sharon will invite her to come along with her*, and so on. These [intentions] are less well-evidenced linguistically, and so are communicated weakly, if at all. This example may suggest that information which is communicated very indirectly is also communicated weakly and vice versa. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example, consider two answers to the question: *Would you like to have a half of my tuna sandwich?*. The reply *No, thanks* would be a more direct way to decline the offer of a tuna sandwich than *I am allergic to fish*, but the latter, conveys this message more strongly (e.g. it is unlikely that a person might change their mind about not eating food which they are allergic to). For this reason, it is communicative (in)directness should be distinguished from communicative strength. This distinction is particularly important in intercultural communication situations, because different cultures have different sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic conventions about what, how and when to communicate more or less directly. They also have different conventions concerning the strength with which the message is communicated; about when it is appropriate to make an assertion, a suggestion or a mere hint. Cognitive pragmatics needs to spell out how the contextual evidence available to interactants combines with the linguistic evidence to help them work out what is communicated on any given occasion. If the account is sufficiently explicit and detailed, it could help with the description and classification of cultural constraints on how people select context for the interpretation of language and how they choose linguistic expressions to convey messages more or less strongly.

PRAGMATICS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Why should pragmatics play an important role in learning and teaching a second or foreign language? The answer to this question is rather straightforward. People generally set out to learn another language because they want to expand their possibilities of communication. As we have seen, there is more to communication than knowledge of language. Typically, the linguistic meaning of an utterance radically falls short of specifying the message conveyed by that utterance. So, although the ability to produce grammatically well-formed utterances with coherent linguistic meanings in a given language is an essential prerequisite for successful communication, it is certainly not sufficient. As pragmatics is a discipline which investigates the different aspects of the complex relation between the linguistic meaning and contextual interpretation, it should play a major role in learning and teaching a new language. This section examines briefly some of the key aspects of language learning and language teaching which are informed by pragmatics.

The Possibility (or Likelihood) of Pragmatic Transfer

People generally learn new things by starting from what they already know. It is widely acknowledged that people's use of a second (or subsequently learnt) language can be influenced by the characteristics of their first (or earlier learnt) language (it is particularly noticeable, for instance, in people's accents). It is important, therefore, for teachers to consider the possibility of pragmatic transfer occurring (Kasper 1992; Žegarac and Pennington 2008).

Naturally, there can be pragmatic differences between languages, just as there can be phonological or syntactic differences. Some of these differences can be relatively 'grammatical'; for example, in phrases like 'In the light of this' or 'Having said that', which refer to what has been said previously, a singular deictic (*this*, *that*) is used in English whereas a plural is used in Greek. Other differences are more socially based; for example, in China if you thank a close friend after they have done you a favour, it may be perceived as 'distancing' behaviour and hence inappropriate; in England, on the other hand, <u>failure</u> to thank would be inappropriate because it implies taking the friend for granted.

During the last twenty years or so, pragmaticians have carried out contrastive research into many different pragmatic features in a very wide range of languages. This area of research is known as *cross-cultural pragmatics*. The majority of studies have focused on speech acts across cultures; for example, many have explored the following questions:

1. what cultural differences (if any) are there in the effect of context on the performance of speech acts? (e.g. if two strangers slightly bump into each other, do British and Greek people evaluate this similarly in terms of degree of seriousness, and thus have similar conceptions as to whether a verbal apology is required?)

2. what cultural differences (if any) are there in the impact of sociopragmatic principles on people's performance of speech acts? (e.g. when responding to a compliment, is it more important to express verbal modesty in Chinese than in English?)

3. what language differences (if any) are there in the influence of pragmalinguistic conventions on the performance of speech acts? (e.g. when expressing disagreement, is it common to soften the impact by using an 'I agree with you but …' structure, or by asking for further information?)

Both similarities and differences have been found across many languages and cultural groups, so this raises another question: what are the implications of the findings for foreign language teaching and learning? Researchers who are interested in this question typically work within *interlanguage pragmatics*, and explore how foreign language learners' performance compares with that of native speakers. However, there is much debate whether native speaker norms are appropriate targets. In today's globalised world, native speaker norms are often complex and varied, and people may wish to present themselves in terms of their own identities rather than simply conform to those of others.

So, the ways in which pragmatic differences are handled may need to vary according to whether they are primarily pragmalinguistic differences (i.e. differences in the linguistic strategies typically used to convey a given illocutionary force) or primarily sociopragmatic differences (i.e. differences in the social assessments, beliefs and principles that underlie language use).

As Thomas (1983:104) points out, learners are often more sensitive about having their sociopragmatic judgements called into question than their pragmalinguistic judgements, because of their strong social basis. So teachers need to consider, for example, whether it is appropriate to train students to say 'Bless you' when someone sneezes, whether they should ask students to address them by their first name when the students' sociocultural norm is to show respect by using the title plus last name, or whether they should encourage students to say 'thank you' in response to a compliment when the students' sociopragmatic convention is to ritualistically reject the compliment out of modesty. Are such matters legitimate teaching points in that they help students interact more naturally with native speakers, or are they a form of language imperialism? There are no easy answers to such questions, and teachers need to think them through very carefully, perhaps in conjunction with their students.

Pragmatic Proficiency and the Value of Language Instruction

Even more fundamentally, teachers need to consider the extent to which language instruction can improve students' pragmatic proficiency. Rose (2005: 390) identifies three basic questions:

1. Is the target pragmatic feature teachable at all?
2. Is instruction in the targeted feature more effective than no instruction?
3. Are different teaching approaches differentially effective?

A range of studies have investigated the first two questions, and have focused on a range of pragmatic features such as routine pragmatic formulae (e.g. *sumimasen* in Japanese), hedging expressions (e.g. *it seems to me*), speech acts (e.g. requests and apologies) and strategies for performing them, discourse markers, and pragmatic comprehension. The studies typically use a research design in which a single group of learners are initially tested for their performance on the pragmatic feature selected for study, then the learners are exposed to the feature for a certain period of time, and after this they are tested again to find out whether their pragmatic performance has improved or not. Rose (2005: 392) concludes that "the research provides ample evidence demonstrating the teachability of pragmatic features."

However, we need to ask whether instruction is more effective than simple exposure. Schmidt (1990: 142) argues that "you can't learn a foreign language (or anything else, for that matter) through subliminal perception." He maintains that noticing is required if the input that learners are exposed to is to become intake and thus made available to them for further processing. Rose (2005) provides a summary review of studies that have tested

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis; in other words, studies that have investigated whether pragmatic instruction (which seeks to draw learners' attention to the targeted pragmatic feature) is more beneficial than simple exposure alone. He concludes that "without exception, learners receiving instruction in pragmatics outperformed those who did not" (Rose 2005: 392) and that "without instruction in pragmatics, learners do not achieve sufficient ability in a range of pragmatic areas (Rose 2005: 397).

Nevertheless, such conclusions need some qualification. Rose also reports that in some studies, learners who received instruction on certain features nevertheless had difficulty in mastering those features, especially when those features entailed very subtle aspects of language use. Moreover, it may be that the effectiveness of instruction is affected by the proficiency level of the learners. Tateyama (2001) reports that short pragmatic routines are teachable to absolute beginners, but we suspect that more complex aspects of pragmatic use (e.g. level of directness/indirectness of requests in English) may require a higher level of proficiency.

Materials and Methods for developing Pragmatic Proficiency

Bardovi-Harlig (2001: 30) proposes that there are two main areas where teachers can usefully help students improve their pragmatic proficiency:

- Expose learners to pragmatically authentic input material;
- Assist learners with pragmatic comprehension.

Sometimes the constraints of the classroom and the teacher's status can limit students' exposure to pragmatically variable authentic language use; for example Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996) point out that teachers' requests to students are worded in ways that reflect the teacher–student role relationship. Such wordings cannot (or should not), therefore, serve as direct models for learners. Can textbooks, therefore, provide a suitably wide range of input? Carter (1998) compared scripted dialogues in published ELT materials with corpus data and found there were significant differences. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) also found that the content of textbooks was often a poor reflection of authentic language use and argues that "in general, textbooks cannot be counted on as a reliable source of pragmatic input for classroom language learners" (2001: 25). Similarly, Vellenga (2004), after analysing the pragmatic content of eight English language textbooks from major publishers, draws the same conclusion. She also makes the following suggestion:

> A pragmatically friendly textbook might involve pragmatic awareness raising activities, extralinguistic contextual information for all language samples, provision of a variety of language forms to accomplish a certain speech act to enable pragmalinguistic choices, and rich cultural information to enable sociopragmatic choices.

Both Bardovi-Harlig (2001) and Vellenga (2004) acknowledge that more recent textbooks may be more suitable, and Vellenga calls for more research into the pragmatic information that is available in textbooks. Kasper (1997) also emphasises the importance of research: “Because native speaker intuition is a notoriously unreliable source of information about the communicative practices of their own community, it is vital that teaching materials on L2 pragmatics are research-based.”

One major project that lives up to this requirement is the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) at Victoria University of Wellington. Holmes et al. (forthcoming) report how they have used their LWP corpus of interactions (which were collected in professional workplaces) as a resource for developing teaching and learning materials to help migrant workers become more pragmatically/interculturally proficient. Marra, Holmes and Riddiford (unpublished paper) explain their general design principles as follows:

> The diversity in the class, coupled with reasonably high levels of English proficiency, means that instruction cannot and should not be focused on specific tasks for specific positions. Instead our focus is sociopragmatic skills which serve as resources in a range of situations. Learners need to be able to manage on-going, dynamic social interaction in a wide range of settings, and this entails the ability to accurately analyse the relative weight of different social dimensions. Hence we explicitly encourage and teach tools for self-reflection and analysis of relevant contextual information. ... A particular challenge in the design of the course thus involves giving adequate weight to ways of empowering the migrant employees to undertake their own analyses of what is going on in workplace interactions ([...], Newton 2007). Or, as Clark and Ivanic (1997: 217) express it, “providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices and on the language practices of others in the institutions of which they are a part and in the wider society in which they live.

Details of how this is carried out in practice can be found in Newton (2007), Marra, Holmes and Riddiford (unpublished paper), Holmes et al. (forthcoming) and Riddiford (2007).

Another potential source of pragmatic information for learners is dictionaries, and Kawamura (2006) argues that pragmatic information in dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, needs to be significantly improved. He maintains that lexicographers need to pay greater attention to pragmatic information, and suggests that more lexical items and expressions should be considered from a pragmatic perspective. For example, he recommends including relatively infrequent words and phrases if they tend to be misused frequently by foreign learners and lead to serious pragmatic failure. However, he also warns that dictionaries are typically expected to be prescriptive, and that users may thus wrongly interpret pragmatic dictionary information in this light.

Pragmatic Performance and Learner Identity

As we noted above, it is impossible to prepare students for every communicative context and need that they will face in real life, and it is thus impractical to provide them with pre-determined strategies for dealing with such contexts and needs. But even if we were able to do so, it would be inappropriate to make this our goal. People's use of language is closely interconnected with their senses of identity, and people need to be able to present themselves in ways that they feel comfortable with. As Kachru and Nelson (1996: 89) maintain, "If a typical American has no wish to speak like or be labelled as a British user of English, why should a Nigerian, an Indian, or a Singaporean user feel any differently?" In fact, some learners <u>may</u> wish to speak like members of the target language/culture – they may wish to identify with the other social group; on the other hands, others may not wish to do so. The key point is that learners need to be able to make that choice for themselves. They need to have a range of strategies at their disposal, and to select meaningfully among them to present themselves as they personally wish.

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FURTHER READING

Introductions to Pragmatics

> Thomas, Jenny (1995) *Meaning in Interaction. An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

> Yule, George (1996) *Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP.

Both of these books provide concise and extremely accessible introductions to pragmatics. Thomas (1995) is particularly rich in interesting examples.

> Cutting, Joan (2007) *Pragmatics and Discourse. A Resource Book for Students. 2nd edition*. London: Routledge.

In addition to explaining key concepts in pragmatics, this book also includes extensive examples, classic readings, and activities.

> Mey, Jacob (2000) *Pragmatics. An Introduction*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

This book takes a strong social perspective, and explores pragmatics in much greater depth than either Thomas (1995) or Yule (1996) but is very accessible.

Pragmatics and Culture

Kasper, Gabriele and Blum-Kulka, Shoshana (eds.) (1993) *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP.

This book comprises empirical studies of interlanguage pragmatics, with a focus on speech acts.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen (ed.) (2008) *Culturally Speaking. Communication, Culture and Politeness Theory*. 2nd edition. London: Continuum.

This book comprises both theoretical and empirical chapters. There are particularly useful chapters on pragmatic transfer, pragmatic data collection and pragmatic data analysis, as well as cross-cultural (comparative) and intercultural (discourse) studies.

Thomas, Jenny (1983) Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2): 91–112.

This widely-quoted journal article discusses different types of pragmatic failure and the difficulties faced by non-native speakers.

Pragmatics and Language Teaching

Rose, Kenneth R. and Kasper, Gabriele (eds) (2001) *Pragmatics in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: CUP.

Alcón, Eva and Martínez-Flor, Alicia (eds) (2008) *Investigating Pragmatics in Foreign Language Learning, Teaching and Testing*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

These two books report many research studies into pragmatics and language learning and teaching.

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen., & Mahan-Taylor, Rebecca (2003) *Teaching Pragmatics.* Washington, DC: United States Department of State. Available at http://www.indiana.edu/~dsls/faculty/kathleen.shtml [accessed 20 June 2009].

This online resource provides a large number of lessons and activities for the teaching of pragmatic aspects of language use.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Read the following authentic interchange, and then carry out a pragmatic analysis of it, paying particular attention to the following features:

1. reference
2. illocutionary force
3. agreement/disagreement
4. face-threatening behaviour

5. context
6. conversational patterns/structure

The Rice Episode

Brian, an American student spending a year in Germany, has cooked a meal for Andi, a German friend, who has recently helped him with his German seminar paper. Andi has just arrived.

01	Brian:	hallo Andi how are you?
02	Andi:	yeah fine oh fine really yeah;
03	Brian:	so (.) everything's ready now (.) I hope you like it (0.3) I have cooked it myself [so because]
04	Andi:	[yeah fine]
05	Brian:	that's what we eat in the South
06	Andi:	{in a loud voice} but that's so much that is FAR TOO MUCH rice
07	Brian:	that doesn't MATTER (0.1) I have paid for it (.) and I have INVITED you (.) [you have]
08	Andi:	[no it] DOES matter it DOES it DOES think of the many poor people who go hungry and would like to eat something like that [well I]
09	Brian:	[I I] believe I (0.1) I [find]
10	Andi:	[I find] one should in this common world in which we do all live (0.2) the world in which we are all endowed with material goods so UNequally we should at least on a small scale try to produce no waste no useless [waste]
11	Brian	[well Andi] I am not I (0.2) [don't believe]
12	Andi:	produce [no waste] and always in our consciousness think that we in the rich western world ...
		{monologue continues for 1½ minutes}

(House 2000: 154–5)

Transcription Conventions

Meaning	Symbol	Example
Overlapping text	word [word] word [word] word	Andi: no useless [waste] Brian: [well Andi] I
Micropause	(.)	Andi: I have paid for it (.) and I
Pause of indicated length (in seconds)	(0.5)	Andi: I (0.1) I find
Emphasised word	CAPITAL LETTERS	Andi: no it DOES matter
Relevant additional information	{descriptive comment}	{in a loud voice}

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