21 · PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others. In theory, we can say anything we like. In practice, we follow a large number of social rules (most of them unconsciously) that constrain the way we speak. There is no law that says we must not tell jokes during a funeral, but it is generally 'not done'. Less obviously, there are norms of formality and politeness that we have intuitively assimilated, and that we follow when talking to people who are older, of the opposite sex, and so on. Writing and signing behaviour are constrained in similar ways.

Pragmatic factors always influence our selection of sounds, grammatical constructions, and vocabulary from the resources of the language. Some of the constraints are taught to us at a very early age – in British English, for example, the importance of saying *please* and *thank you*, or (in some families) of not referring to an adult female in her presence as *she* (p. 248). In many languages, pragmatic distinctions of formality, politeness, and intimacy are spread throughout the grammatical, lexical, and phonological systems, ultimately reflecting matters of social class, status, and role (§10, p. 99). A well-studied example is the pronoun system, which frequently presents distinctions that convey pragmatic force – such as the choice between *tu* and *vous* in French.

Languages differ greatly in these respects. Politeness expressions, for instance, may vary in frequency and meaning. Many European languages do not use their word for *please* as frequently as English does; and the function and force of *thank you* may also alter (e.g. following the question 'Would you like some more cake?', English *thank you* means 'yes', whereas French *merci* would mean 'no'). Conventions of greeting, leave-taking, and dining also differ greatly from language to language. In some countries it is polite to remark to a host that we are enjoying the food; in others it is polite to stay silent. On one occasion, at a dinner in an Arabic community, the present author made the mistake of remarking on the excellence of the food before him. The host immediately apologized, and arranged for what was there to be replaced!

Pragmatic errors break no rules of phonology, syntax, or semantics. The elements of *How's tricks, your majesty?* will all be found in English language textbooks and dictionaries, but for most of us the sequence is not permissible from a pragmatic viewpoint. Pragmatics has therefore to be seen as separate from the 'levels' of language represented in linguistic models of analysis (§13). It is not a 'part' of language structure, but its domain is so closely bound up with structural matters that it cannot be ignored in this section of the encyclopedia.

THE IDENTITY OF PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics is not at present a coherent field of study. A large number of factors govern our choice of language in social interaction, and it is not yet clear what they all are, how they are best interrelated, and how best to distinguish them from other recognized areas of linguistic enquiry. There are several main areas of overlap.

Semantics (§17) Pragmatics and semantics both take into account such notions as the intentions of the speaker, the effects of an utterance on listeners, the implications that follow from expressing something in a certain way, and the knowledge, beliefs, and presuppositions about the world upon which speakers and listeners rely when they interact.

Stylistics (§12) *and sociolinguistics* (§§10, 63) These fields overlap with pragmatics in their study of the social relationships which exist between participants, and of the way extralinguistic setting, activity, and subject-matter can constrain the choice of linguistic features and varieties.

Psycholinguistics (§§7, 38) Pragmatics and psycholinguistics both investigate the psychological states and abilities of the participants that will have a major effect upon their performance – such factors as attention, memory, and personality.

Discourse analysis (§20) Both discourse analysis and pragmatics are centrally concerned with the analysis of conversation, and share several of the philosophical and linguistic notions that have been developed to handle this topic (such as the way information is distributed within a sentence, deictic forms (p. 106), or the notion of conversational 'maxims' (p. 117)).

As a result of these overlapping areas of interest, several conflicting definitions of the scope of pragmatics have arisen. One approach focuses on the factors formally encoded in the structure of a language (honorific forms, *tu / vous* choice, and so on). Another relates it to a particular view of semantics: here, pragmatics is seen as the study of all aspects of meaning other than those involved in the analysis of sentences in terms of truth conditions (p. 107). Other approaches adopt a much broader perspective. The broadest sees pragmatics as the study of the principles and practice underlying *all* interactive linguistic performance – this including all aspects of language usage, understanding, and appro-

priateness. Textbooks on pragmatics to date, accordingly, present a diversity of subject matter, and a range of partially conflicting orientations and methodologies, which proponents of the subject have yet to resolve. However, if we take diversity of opinion to be a sign of healthy growth in a subject, it must be said that few other areas of language study have such a promising future.

SPEECH ACTS

The British philosopher J. L. Austin (1911–60) was the first to draw attention to the many functions performed by utterances as part of interpersonal communication. In particular, he pointed out that many utterances do not communicate information, but are equivalent to actions. When someone says 'I apologize ...', 'I promise ...', 'I will' (at a wedding), or 'I name this ship ...', the utterance immediately conveys a new psychological or social reality. An apology takes place when someone apologizes, and not before. A ship is named only when the act of naming is complete. In such cases, to say is to perform. Austin thus called these utterances *performatives*, seeing them as very different from statements that convey information (*constatives*). In particular, performatives are not true or false. If A says 'I name this ship ...', B cannot then say 'That's not true'!

In speech act analysis, we study the effect of utterances on the behaviour of speaker and hearer, using a threefold distinction. First, we recognize the bare fact that a communicative act takes place: the *locutionary* act. Secondly, we look at the act that is performed as a result of the speaker making an utterance – the cases where 'saying = doing', such as betting, promising, welcoming, and warning: these, known as *illocutionary* acts, are the core of any theory of speech acts. Thirdly, we look at the particular effect the speaker's utterance has on the listener, who may feel amused, persuaded, warned, etc., as a consequence: the bringing about of such effects is known as a *perlocutionary* act. It is important to appreciate that the illocutionary force of an utterance and its perlocutionary effect may not coincide. If I warn you against a particular course of action, you may or may not heed my warning.

There are thousands of possible illocutionary acts, and several attempts have been made to classify them into a small number of types. Such classifications are difficult, because verb meanings are often not easy to distinguish, and speakers' intentions are not always clear. One influential approach sets up five basic types (after J. R. Searle, 1976):

- *Representatives* The speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to the truth of a proposition, e.g. *affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report.*
- *Directives* The speaker tries to get the hearer to do something, e.g. *ask, challenge, command, insist, request.*

- *Commissives* The speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to a certain course of action, e.g. *guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow.*
- *Expressives* The speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs, e.g. *apologize, deplore, congratulate, thank, welcome.*
- *Declarations* The speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation solely by making the utterance, e.g. *I resign, I baptize, You're fired, War is hereby declared.*

FELICITY CONDITIONS

Speech acts are successful only if they satisfy several criteria, known as 'felicity conditions'. For example, the 'preparatory' conditions have to be right: the person performing the speech act has to have the authority to do so. This is hardly an issue with such verbs as *apologize, promise,* or *thank,* but it is important constraint on the use of such verbs as *fine, baptize, arrest,* and *declare war,* where only certain people are qualified to use these utterances. Then, the speech act has to be executed in the correct manner: in certain cases there is a procedure to be followed exactly and completely (e.g. *baptizing*); in others, certain expectations have to be met (e.g. one can only *welcome* with a pleasant demeanour). And, as a third example, 'sincerity' conditions have to be present: the speech act must be performed in a sincere manner. Verbs such as *apologize, guarantee,* and *vow* are effective only if speakers mean what they say; *believe* and *affirm* are valid only if the speakers are not lying.

Ordinary people automatically accept these conditions when they communicate, and they depart from them only for very special reasons. For example, the request *Will you shut the door?* is appropriate only if (a) the door is open, (b) the speaker has a reason for asking, and (c) the hearer is in a position to perform the action. If any of these conditions does not obtain, then a special interpretation of the speech act has to apply. It may be intended as a joke, or as a piece of sarcasm. Alternatively, of course, there may be doubt about the speaker's visual acuity, or even sanity!

INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

Some speech acts directly address a listener, but the majority of acts in everyday conversation are indirect. For example, there are a very large number of ways of asking someone to perform an action. The most direct way is to use the imperative construction (*Shut the door*), but it is easy to sense that this would be inappropriate in many everyday situations – too abrupt or rude, perhaps. Alternatives stress such factors as the hearer's ability or desire to perform the action, or the speaker's reasons for having the action done. These include the following:

I'd be grateful if you'd shut the door.
Could you shut the door?
Would you mind shutting the door?
It'd help to have the door shut.
It's getting cold in here.
Shall we keep out the draught?
Now, Jane, what have you forgotten to do?
Brrr!

Any of these could, in the right situation, function as a request for action, despite the fact that none has the clear form of an imperative. But of course, it is always open to the hearer to misunderstand an indirect request – either accidentally or deliberately.
Teacher: Johnny, there's some chalk on the floor.
Johnny: Yes, there is, sir.
Teacher: Well, pick it up, then!

Each part of this notice conveys the directive illocutionary force intended by the writer. The perlocutionary effect, however, is not as anticipated!