

TUTORIAL
5.17

Pragmatics

This tutorial looks at - pragmatics - or language in use. Pragmatics is what we do with our language -how we indicate what we want, what we think and what we need. It is where all the other linguistic areas we have looked at so far come together to make communication happen.

Introduction

When we acquire our first language we learn the sounds of the language, as well as the principles of the phonology and syntax. But this is not enough. We also learn how to *use* the language.

When we are children we quickly learn how to make requests, later we learn how to issue invitations, give orders, ask for information and greet and farewell people in socially appropriate ways. As well as learning how to do these things, we also learn how to interpret them correctly.

Pragmatics looks at meaning in context, and why a speaker chose to speak in exactly the way they did.

Speech acts

When we ask questions, issue invitations, give orders, ask for information or greet and farewell people, we are actually performing an action by saying something - a speech act. Everything we say is made up of a series of one or more speech acts.

There are different types of speech act:

Directives:

This is when the speaker is trying to get someone else to do something, e.g.:

Requests - *"Would you mind passing the salt?"*

Commands - *"Pass the salt!"*

Begging - *"Please, please pass the salt."*

Questions - *"Where is the salt?"*



Commissives:

The speaker is committing himself or herself to doing something in the future:

Promises - *"I'll pay it back to you by Thursday."*

Guarantees - *"You can count on me to pay it back."*

Threats - *"I'll have to report you if you do that again."*

Offers - *"I'll go to the shop on the way home if you like."*

Expressives:

The speaker is expressing their feelings or attitude, e.g.:

Apologies - *"I'm sorry I left you alone."*

Sympathising - *"I hope you are going to be OK."*

Welcoming - *"Please come in and make yourself at home."*

Thanks - *"Thanks for bringing that back."*

Congratulations - *"That's great news you won the trip!"*

Representatives:

The speaker is giving information – they are making a claim about whether a proposition is true or not, e.g.:

Predictions - *"It's going to be hot today."*

Claims - *"I think it's hot today."*

Assertions - *"It's hot outside."*

Hypothesising - *"It feels like it could be hot later today."*

Conclusions - *"It must be hot outside."*

Declarations:

The speaker changes something in the world by the act of speaking, e.g.:

Resigning - *"I quit."*

Naming - *"We'll call him Sam."*

Marrying - *"I now pronounce you man and wife."*

Hiring - *"You've got the job, you start on Monday."*

Firing - *"You should start looking for a position that is a better fit for your skill set."*

Common Ground

No matter which of these types of speech act someone is performing, we need to consider the meaning *in context*, to figure out why the speaker chose to speak in exactly the way they did and what they intended to mean. Look at the last example from above -

"You should start looking for a position that is a better fit for your skill set."

Because you were given the information that this statement is an example of 'firing' - you probably imagined a scene where an employer was gently letting his employee know that he was being fired. But, if you were not given that clue to the context, the statement *could* be interpreted in many different ways.



It might be someone giving advice to a friend, or a rival employer trying to convince this person to leave their current job and join their staff instead, or it might be a mother protecting her child from disappointment after they had been corrected at work, or it could even be a golf coach helping his client who has a bad swing.

So, in order to interpret statements correctly, we need to be able to draw on *common ground*. The common ground needed to correctly interpret the statement above would include all of these kinds of things:

- who is speaking
- who they are speaking to
- all you know about these people - their personalities, status, gender, their relationship to one another
- the interactional history between them (e.g. is this an employee the boss has been struggling with for years? Is it his favorite nephew? etc.)
- information about how the world works which is reasonably widely known within the culture (e.g. an understanding that jobs are highly sought after, that a business can't keep on unproductive employees, that people have to sell their skills to employers, etc.)

In other words, common ground is the sort of assumed knowledge that speakers bring to a conversation. It is the reason that when a man tells the story about how he lost his job and now doesn't have the money to pay the mortgage this month, it would be told in quite a different way to his bank manager, than to his sister (with whom he shares a much greater degree of common ground).

Good language learning programs say that culture and language are inseparable, and that before someone is able to communicate clearly in a cross-cultural situation, they need to learn both the culture and the language. Another way of putting this is that people need to learn, not just to *speak* the language but how to *use* the language. Their ability to really use the language is based on this aspect of sharing *common ground*. They need to develop an understanding of culture, including how relationships work, information about how the world works and how people interact - and they also need to have real relationships with people, so that they can speak into those relationships based on a shared life experience and mutual understanding.

Intended meaning

Even with shared common ground, it is not always clear what someone intends to mean by what they say. Even between two native speakers, there is often a difference between the speaker's intended meaning and the meaning that the hearer understands from what they heard. So linguists distinguish between the

illocution (what the speaker intended) and *perlocution* (what the hearer understood) of an utterance.

If someone says to me: “You did a great job this time!” - their intended meaning could be that they really appreciated the work I did, but if I am insecure for some reason, I may hear them to be saying that I did a terrible job last time.

Because illocution is open to interpretation, speakers will sometimes use it in quite subtle ways. We have all heard people make critical remarks but then deny that they meant the comment to be offensive (e.g., “She’s looking slimmer today.”) We are also familiar with the way politicians use ambiguous words and phrases so that they can deny the real meaning of their remarks at a later time.

In spoken language, we can often use the tone of our voice, or stress on particular words, or gestures and facial expressions to convey what our meaning is. If the example from above was spoken by a friend with a smile on their face and stress on the word *great* (You did a *great* job this time!), then their intended meaning is much clearer. If it was said by a critical person with an angry expression on their face and different stress (You did a great job *this* time!), I would be likely to interpret it as a criticism rather than praise.

Cooperation in conversation

So far we have looked at individual speech acts. But how do participants in a conversation structure and interpret utterances in light of what has gone before?

There are general rules that we follow when we have a conversation - we cooperate together to make the conversation ‘work’. Not everyone always follows these rules, but people who obey the cooperative principle in their language use will make sure that what they say in a conversation furthers the *purpose* of that particular conversation. The cooperative principle has been broken down (by Grice 1975:45-6) into these ‘rules’ for good conversation:



1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation *more* informative than necessary.
3. Do not say what you believe to be false.
4. Do not say anything for which you lack adequate evidence
5. Be relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).

6. Avoid obscurity of expression (use words the other person will understand).
7. Avoid ambiguity (be clear in what you say).
8. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
9. Be orderly.

These rules are about how a good speaker should behave in conversation for the conversation to achieve its purpose. People sometimes lie, give too much information, exaggerate, etc. so it is clear that not all people obey the cooperative principle at all times.

It can also seem that many everyday utterances also seem to break the rules too:

- A: *Do you know what time it is?*
 B: *Yeah, I know, I'm nearly ready!*

The new smart phone is like, a million times better!

Yeah, the earth is flat, pigs can fly and Henry will be here on time.

All of the statements above seem to break either the rule of relevance or truthfulness. But in reality, these utterances are not uncooperative; they just should not be taken literally. They are indirect speech acts, and so we need to look at what message a speaker *implies* in what they are saying:

- In the first one, A was giving B a subtle hurry up.
- The second one implies the new phone is much, much better.
- The third one is implying that I doubt Henry will come on time.

Indirectness

In all of these examples, the speaker is not saying exactly what they mean. Not saying what we mean might seem to make communication more difficult, but it actually serves a number of functions. The biggest advantage of using implication is that it allows us to be much briefer in what we say than if we spelt out exactly what we meant. In fact, people who know each other well can often rely on shared background knowledge to an extraordinary degree.

Indirect statements are also used in order to appear more polite. We rely on our knowledge of implication to interpret statements such as, "*Wow, it's quite warm in here, isn't it?*" as a request to open a window. The thinking process I might go through if someone said that to me while visiting our home is something like:

1. People do not make statements for no reason.
2. Why is she sharing this statement with me?
3. Ah, she must want me to do something about it.

Why is it that indirectness is seen to aid politeness? The answer lies in the *freedom* it gives the hearer in acting upon the request. Any request is a potentially face-threatening act, as it imposes on the hearer's freedom to act as they please.

If my visitor says to me straight out "*Open the window*" or, "*I want you to open the window*" then I have to do it or risk starting an argument. If, however, they are less direct and say, "*It's warm in here, isn't it?*" then it gives me an easy way out if I don't want to open the window – I can simply agree with my visitor and the situation is dealt with. I don't look rude for not complying and they don't look like they're being bossy.

As we already saw when we looked at some of the differences between cultures, some cultures value freedom and individuality more than others, and some cultures are much more indirect than others. Unless you are aware of the differences that can exist between cultures in these kinds of areas, there can easily be hurt feelings and misunderstandings - "*Oh, these people are so impolite!*"

Direct and indirect language

The function of a speech act may differ from the sentence type of the utterance. For example;

- "*I'd like a drink*", has the form of a statement, but the intended speech act is actually a request.
- "*Can you shut the door?*" has the form of a question, but the intended speech act is a command.

Interrogatives (questions) in English are often used for functions other than questions. They are often used for commands as well - "*Would you mind shutting the door?*" or "*Can I ask you to shut the door please?*" They can also be used for suggestions - "*Should we stay for another drink?*" or invitations - "*Why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow?*"

Declaratives can also be used for commands - "*That's my coat behind you*" (meaning "Pass me my coat which is behind you."), or invitations - "*You're welcome to join us for dinner tomorrow*", or warnings - "*You're driving too fast.*"

When the *intended function* of an utterance matches its *sentence type* we say that it is a **direct speech act**. "*Can you drive a car?*" is a direct speech act; it has the form of an interrogative, with the 'normal' function of a question – a request for information.

When the function and sentence type *do not* match, it is an **indirect speech act**. "*Do you know what the time is?*" has the form of a question, but it would

not (normally) be used as a yes-no question; its normal function would be a request for action, for the hearer to tell you the time, or even for the hearer to hurry up and get ready. So it serves the indirect speech act of a request. “*What are you looking at?*” could be a genuine request for information (direct speech act: question) or it could have the indirect speech act of a threat or warning (stop looking at me).

Cultural diversity in speech acts

Just as the phonology, morphology and syntax of each language is different, the way utterances are used to perform acts differs from language to language.

In many languages, including English, there are special words for greeting and farewelling such as *hello* and *goodbye*. Neither of these mean anything else. However, in English we also use phrases or sentences that seem to mean something else as greetings or farewells: “*How are you?*” or “*How’s it going?*” These sentences are not normally intended as a request for information. “*See you later*”, is a reduced version of a statement. “*Take care*”, and “*Have a nice day*”, have the sentence form of a command, but are not normally intended to be commands, but leave-takings.

Expressions that other languages use for greetings vary in their sentence type and function as well:

The Dowayo (Cameroon) greet each other using a sentence meaning “Is the sky clear for you?” This is a sentence of the interrogative type, but is not a request for information. The Kokota (Solomon Islands) greet each other with *lao hai* “Where are you going?” but are astonished and amused if the addressee actually attempts to give them an informative answer. And the Naxi (southern China) greet one another by saying *a lala le* - “Are your arms busy?” (meaning, “Are you feeling well enough to be busy working?”)



Farewell sequences also differ cross-linguistically. In almost every culture, it isn’t normal for people to simply walk away when they take their leave, they will almost always utter a formulaic farewell statement.

In many languages the farewell has the sentence type of a command. In some it means “stay here” - as in Ata (PNG), where the most common leave-taking is to say *nini naxolu, eni alai* “You stay, I will go”. In Fijian they say *moce*, “sleep!” These are not interpreted as instructions to not leave after the speaker has left, or to go to sleep, they are simply farewells.

Languages also differ in the relationship between speech act and sentence type. For example, in English, commands are not usually given using imperative or direct statements. In other cultures commands are usually given

with direct statements, and an interrogative would not be interpreted as a command. So in English, if a passenger wants a bus driver to open the door of a bus, he would normally say something like “*Could you open the door please?*”, but in Hebrew, the normal form would be “*Open the door.*”



DISCUSSION POINTS

Pragmatics

1. Below is a historical story (from the 1980s), written by a member of the Ata people group (New Britain, PNG). Read the English translation and try to figure out what the story is about and what is happening in the story. On the next page is a clear explanation. What are some of the misunderstandings that arose when you just read the translation of the story below and what are the specific pieces of shared knowledge you were missing? What does this illustrate in terms of cross-cultural communication?

Molomolo laposalaxu (in Ata language)

Loxo molomolo laposalaxu io ulai no taoni la nenu ilou momu i'oxonu la'ilali. Loxo ane'i i'oxonu la'ilali la ilalaxinu la'ilali ane. Imolo sie mo ia'asou toto'o mo ia'asou mo'u mo ia'asou sikapu mo ixeta'u ue. Ilalaxinu la'ilali ane xe ixalixu no tuala ukalu laso ane'i tatulanu molomolo ne ino'u so ilaixu no taoni. Ilaixu no taoni la ane'i tasema no tuala mo tamulu no tuala ne tasema so ixa'umusou la'ilali xe tamulu so itelaiou ualu. Ukalu xe anu so o'olovoxo la ane'i tamitema no tuala ilalaxi so ikuakua.

Loxo ane'i ilalaxi la ilalaxinu mi loxo tavi mo lapoe mo lavo'o. Xe ivisime'a ane'i no taoni xe ixali la ane'i tamitema no tuala ive'a ane'i ane milaixu molomolo no taoni ne. Ane'i ive'a ive'a xo xe ukalu. Laso ane'i ilaixu molomolo no tani. Xe olovoxo laso ane'i ilalaxi so ixumu no olovoxo. Loxo ane'i ixumu la tasema ilei no ale xe tamulu so ilei nonano.

The First-born Child (translation of the Ata story above)

If a child is the first-born child, and he goes to town, then his mother and father would prepare some food. They would

prepare the food like this: they would gather taro and dig up sweet potato and dig up yams and dig up sikapu [another root vegetable], and they would cut sugar cane. Once they had gathered the food and then carried it back to the village, then they would get ready to go with the child to take him to town. They would take him to town, but meanwhile the women in the village and the men in the village would *ixa'umusou* food [cook food by burying it under hot stones]. Then the men would climb coconut trees. Later on, toward evening, the people in the village would get ready to *ikuakua* [call out from the ridge].

They would get ready like that, and they would also prepare spears and stone axes and rocks. Then they would wait for the people to come back from town. When they arrived, then the people in the village would hit them; the people with the child who had been to town. They would hit them, and hit them, and then it would be finished, and then they would take the child into the house. Then that night, they would get ready to eat the food they had prepared. They would all eat the food, and the women would dance outside the house, and the men would dance inside.



ACTIVITIES

Pragmatics

1. For each of the following utterances, state the possible intended meaning and any possible interpretations;
 - a. I don't suppose you could spare five dollars.
 - b. It's a bit cold in here.
 - c. Are you doing anything special tomorrow night?
 - d. That dog bites.
 - e. You're not going out looking like that, young lady!
 - f. I'd love another slice of chocolate cake, you're so kind.
 - g. Walk and talk!
 - h. Why is there chocolate all over the couch?
2. Rephrase each of the utterances above as direct speech acts - where someone says exactly what they mean rather than implying it.

The First-born Child (*Further explanation*)

In Ata culture, the first-born child of a family has an important role in the family and a higher status in the village and clan than subsequent children, so the people of their village celebrate any significant event in the first-born child's life. The child's first trip to town is significant, because in a mountain village, making a trip to town was a relatively rare event. The foods mentioned would only be all eaten together for a special event, because it would be quite extravagant to eat all of these together - and the addition of sugar cane and the mention of the men climbing coconut trees (the implication being that they are gathering coconuts to eat) also marks this event as being a special event and an important feast.

Calling out from the ridge (*ikuakua*) is a traditional yodeling welcome cry that is unique to the Ata mountain people. A group returning to the village would call out from a long distance to their family in the village on the high ridges, who would then reply with the same cry. This is done to let them know they are on their way back to the village after a long trip away, so the people in the village can prepare for their return. Hospitality is extremely important, and was often a matter of survival in the previous generations, when neighbouring tribes were at war with the Ata, or someone returning might have been in real need of food and shelter.

When the first-born child and his parents would return to the village, the people gathered there would "play act" hitting them with stones and axes and also thrusting spears in their direction, yelling at them and running toward them. This is a traditional way of greeting people at a significant event - such as when outsiders first come to the village, or when someone special returns after a long time away. Often the older women will also gather dirt from the ground or ash from the fire and cover their heads and faces with this dust as a sign of welcome. [There are historical and spiritual reasons for this behavior, which we won't explain in any more detail here].

The house that they would have taken the male child into is the *novi* or men's house. Traditionally women were not allowed into this house, so they would dance outside while the men would dance inside the men's house. The dancing would traditionally continue till dawn of the next day, and was a part of any significant event because every such event would have spiritual connotations as well as social ones, and dancing and singing had a spiritual function.

This 'first trip to town' is an important event in the life of the first-born child and his family, and so the Ata person recalling this decided to tell it as a significant story in their history and have it recorded in writing.

Activity Answers:

1. & 2. Possible intended meaning and any possible interpretations, and statements rephrased as direct speech acts:

- a. I don't suppose you could spare five dollars. (I want to borrow five dollars.)
- b. It's a bit cold in here. (Do something to make it warmer in here.)
- c. Are you doing anything special tomorrow night? (I want to make an arrangement with you for tomorrow night.)
- d. That dog bites. (Don't go near that dog/I think you should stay away from that dog.)
- e. You're not going out looking like that, young lady! (I don't approve of what you are wearing/I think what you are wearing is immodest.)
- f. I'd love another slice of chocolate cake, you're so kind. (You should have offered me another slice of chocolate cake.)
- g. Walk and talk! (I don't have time to stop and talk to you. I am more important than you, so hurry up and say what you have to say - I'm busy.)
- h. Why is there chocolate all over the couch? (I think you put chocolate all over the couch.)