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Semantics and Pragmatics

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Semantics is the study of meaning in its linguistic context, even when the reference is to something non-linguistic and external. **Pragmatics**, on the other hand, is the study of meaning derived from a context that is understood by both the speaker and the listener. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, pragmatics includes the study of

(a) how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of the real world,

(b) how speakers use and understand speech acts,

(c) how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

To put it differently, pragmatics means reading between the lines and looking for meanings beyond the immediate linguistic context. Consider the following example of a conversation between A and B.

A: It won't be Bhatia this time.

B: Yes, history does not always repeat itself.

If we look only at the linguistic (grammatical and syntactic, and phonological) context, the two sentences appear to be unrelated. Speaker A observes that a man named Bhatia won't make it this time. What time? Where will he make it to? Then, what does the remark made by B—history does not always repeat itself—mean? How is it a response to the observation made by A? However, if we try to read between the lines, we can suppose that both A and B know that Bhatia is a candidate from their constituency. A says that Bhatia is not going to be elected this time. B's response shows agreement: Yes, Bhatia is not going to win the next election. However, what A and B together know is another fact. Bhatia has won the election from this constituency several times in the past. This is obvious from A's "this time" (as different from other times in the past) and from B's remark that "history does not always repeat itself." In this case, meaning of the two sentences depends on the knowledge shared by the speaker and the responder.

The same sentences could mean something different if the context were different. For example, Bhatia may be a common friend or acquaintance of A and B, and he may be appearing in an examination. The meaning will change only to the extent that it is not an election but an examination. Other things—A and B's shared knowledge of Bhatia, Bhatia's success in the past, and the possible failure this time—will remain the same.

The above example reveals that the basic model of verbal communication must involve the following factors, which both the speaker and his listener share:

(a) A body of linguistic knowledge, which includes vocabulary, grammar and syntax

(b) A body of non-linguistic knowledge and beliefs shared by the speaker and his hearer

(c) The ability to make inferences and logical deductions from what is uttered by the other person

The meaning conveyed by any speech-act would thus comprise not only semantic entailments but also pragmatic implications. But as the above example must have shown, pragmatic implications can be different and multiple, depending on the context available. So let us take up some of the important factors that play a crucial role in pragmatic interpretations.

(1) Context

Pragmatic implications depend heavily on the knowledge of the context. We do not say things in a vacuum; instead, there is always a context which is partly linguistic (things which have already been said) and partly non-linguistic (the situation in which the speakers find themselves, their knowledge of the world, their experience and their expectations). We take full advantage of this context when we try to interpret a speech act. Take, for example, the homonym *mole*. It has got three meanings: (a) a small animal with grey fur, (b) a small dark brown mark on the skin, and (c) a spy or a person who passes on secret information to an organization or country. How do we then decide which meaning is intended? Here the context becomes important. If we are talking about small animals in a zoology class, we may be saying *mole* in the sense (a). If we are in a beauty parlour, talking about skin problems, we are using the word in its second sense. And if we are talking of spies, we may refer to an acquaintance who is suspected to be a spy.

Now consider the following bit of talk between A and B:

A: Where was Anil last night?

B: Well, there was a white Maruti parked outside Rekha's apartment last night.

On the surface, B's response to A's question appears to be quite irrelevant. What has a white Maruti parked outside Rekha's apartment got to do with Anil, when there is no reference to any of these things in A's question? But on a close reading, B's remark gains its meaning from the context referred to. Speakers A and B know for fact that Anil owns a white Maruti. Both of them also know where Rekha lives. So if the white Maruti was parked outside Rekha's apartment, the inference is that Anil spent the night with Rekha. This is how Speaker B's remark becomes a relevant answer to A's question. The main point is the importance of the context and the sharing of this knowledge by both the speaker and the hearer.

(2) Relevance

The above example emphasizes another factor which enables us to extract meaning pragmatically from an apparently vague utterance. It is the assumption that what is said in response is relevant to the first speaker's remark or question. Indeed Paul Grice, a philosopher of language, has formulated a number of rules governing the way in which utterances can be understood in context. The rules formulated by him are known as **Grice's Maxims**. Two of these maxims are the **Maxim of Relevance** and the **Maxim of Quantity**. While the first insists on making the contribution relevant, the second, known as the Maxim of Quantity, emphasizes the need to say as much as one can.

If we study the above example with reference to Grice's first maxim, we will find A trying to analyze B's response in the following manner: The answer that there

was a white Maruti parked outside Rekha's apartment has some relevance to the question "Where was Anil last night?" So he argues with himself: Anil owns a white Maruti. A white Maruti was parked outside Rekha's apartment. From this one can infer (though not logically deduce) that Anil was with Rekha. If A also knows that Anil and Rekha are friends, the inference made by A will become a logical deduction.

Sometimes, one has really to work for extracting the pragmatic meaning from a context which is not entirely clear or which is deliberately made vague and non-committal. Consider the following example. Let us assume that Dr Prem Kumar was Sudha's guide for her Ph. D. Dr. Smith, the head of the department of a university, seeks Dr. Kumar's opinion on considering Sudha for a teaching post Conversation takes place on the phone, so that we have only Dr. Kumar's words and not Dr Smith's.

> Oh, she is a very nice and beautiful young woman.
>
> She is very good-natured, and as long as she was here, she got on very well with every one in the department. Everyone seemed to like her.

Yes, she's very well behaved, well mannered, and always nice to talk to.

What is one to think of Dr Kumar's comments on Sudha? On the surface, he says very fine things about her: she is nice, sweet-tempered, well-behaved, popular, etc. But he does not say even a single word about her suitability for the post she has applied for! So although Dr. Kumar does not say even a single word against Sudha, Dr. Smith can easily infer that Dr. Kumar does not recommend Sudha for the post. This is called flouting the maxim of relevance, but even this conscious flouting or deliberate evasion has an obvious meaning.

(3) Conversational Implicature

Another important maxim of Paul Grice's is called **conversational implicature**. What is meant by this is the pragmatic implication of an apparently irrelevant remark or utterance which follows from a remark on the assumption that it was intended as relevant. In this case, there is no shared knowledge but the speaker expects the listener to construct the relevant context for himself. Consider the following example:

A: Anil has taken a fancy to Rekha.

B: Well, rolling in mud used to be his favourite sport when he was a child.

These two statements appear to be quite unrelated. Anil's taking fancy to Rekha has nothing apparently to do with his rolling in mud when he was a boy. In this case, the shared assumptions are (a) Anil's taking fancy to Rekha, and (b) there being something queer about this. As B's remark is intended as a response to or comment on A's statement, it acquires a relevant pragmatic implication which suggests that Anil has always had queer tastes and shown eccentric behaviour, and his liking for Rekha is all of a piece with his eccentric nature.

(4) Deixis

In language certain words and phrases cannot be understood exactly unless we know the physical positioning of the speaker. For example, words *like here, there, this, that, now, then, yesterday,* and *tomorrow* derive their meaning from where the speaker is positioned physically in terms of time and space. This is also true of the pronouns used by the speaker: pronouns like *you, I, we, one, they,* and so on. It is difficult to understand all these expressions which are known as *deictic* expressions

(*deixis* means "pointing" through language) without knowing who is speaking, who he is speaking to, and who or what he is speaking about?

These deictic expressions are of three kinds. Any deictic expression which refers to a person (such as *you, I, me, he, her*, etc.) is an example of **person deixis**; any word or expression that refers to a place (*here, there, nowhere*, etc.) is called a **place deixis**, and any word or phrase which refers to time (*now, tomorrow, last nigh*t, etc.) is called a **time deixis**. The moot point is that such expressions are understood and have to be interpreted in the light of who the speaker is, what he has in mind, and which time, place or person he is referring to.

(5) Reference

In pragmatics, reference, as George Yule defines it, is "an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something." It is often assumed that the words used to identify someone are directly related to that person. But this is not really so. Sometimes we associate certain names with some people even though they are not their real names. A waiter in a restaurant may name a regular customer as chicken biryani if this customer is very fond of it and usually orders it. Similarly, we associate the name of the writer with a book written by him. For example, we say, "how much of Shakespeare have you read?" when what we actually mean is "How many plays of Shakespeare have you read?" At other times, we may be even more direct and say where is your Lawrence (meaning a particular novel by D. H. Lawrence)? The key process involved in extracting a pragmatic meaning in such cases is called **inference**.

When a referent, usually a noun, has been established, we subsequently use a pronoun to refer to it. The pronoun thus used is called **anaphora,** while the noun which has come earlier and which the pronoun replaces is called its **antecedent**. Though rhetoric requires that the reference to the antecedent must be very clear and in the same grammatical form, we are not so exact in speech. The result is that the antecedent has to be guessed. In the sentence, "She had been waiting for the bus, but he drove by without stopping it," "he" cannot logically refer to either she or the bus, but it is implied that it refers to the driver because a bus implies a driver.

(6) Presuppositions

The **presupposition** underlying a sentence, as used in semantics and pragmatics, is a necessary condition on that sentence's being true or false. A presupposition involves the assumption of truth by the speaker, an assumption which is known to the listener. For example, if we say that "he is going to meet his divorced wife," the presupposition is that the two were once married to each other. If the former were not true, one would not be inclined to assert or deny the latter statement. Let us take another example.

A: Someone has stolen my books.

B: Anil must have done so.

In these sentences the statement of A—"Someone has stolen my books"—is a presupposition. The truth or falsehood of B's statement—"Anil must have done so"—clearly depends on A. If A is not true, B cannot be true either. This does not mean, though, that the conjecture hazarded by B is true. In the questioning done by police and detective agencies the accused is confronted with certain presuppositions which are presented as truth. Take, for example, the following question: "Have you stopped

beating your wife?" Whether the accused responds with "yes" or "no," the pre-supposition (that he used to beat his wife) remains true. Or take another question: "How many pegs of liquor had you drunk before you rammed your car into the bus?" In this case, there are two presuppositions: (a) he was dead drunk when his car collided against a bus; and (b) the bus-driver was not responsible for the accident.

A simple test to find out whether or not a sentence is a presupposition is to apply to it what is called the **constancy under negation** test. For example, Rekha says, "I regret having rejected the marriage proposal from Anil." We can turn this statement into a negative: "I do not regret having rejected the marriage proposal from Anil." The presupposition underlying the affirmative and the negative statements is that Rekha did indeed receive a marriage proposal from Anil.

(7) Sentences as Speech Acts

It is the philosopher J. L. Austin who first wrote of language as performance and described sentences, whether statements, questions or commands, as **speech acts**. For when a speaker addresses someone, he not only wants to convey his message successfully but also wants his message to be taken in a certain way. This is done by choosing a particular sentence form or appropriating a sentence form which would normally not perform the function it is usually assigned. But first let us look at the three most common forms of sentences and the functions they normally perform:

Form	Function	Example
Declarative/assertive	to make an affirmative/negative statement	You help him with money. You don't help him with money.
Imperative	to give a command/order	Help him with money.
Interrogative	to ask a question	Do you help him with money?

When we use the interrogative form to ask a question, it is its normal use which can be described as a **direct speech act**: for example, "When does your train leave?" But when we use the question form to make a request, it becomes an **indirect speech act**; for example, "Could you post this letter for me?" In the same way, one may use the declarative form to make a request or give a command. The sentence "It is cold in here because of the open window" may mean: "Go and shut the window." This is another indirect speech act. But indirect speech acts can be misunderstood by foreigners who have learnt the language but do not understand the social assumptions underlying certain forms of sentences.

(8) Politeness as a Face-Saving Pragmatic Device

In pragmatics, politeness is related to our face, by which is meant our public image, and the effort to save face is reflected in our speech. The sociolinguists Brown and Levinson distinguish between two kinds of face: "positive" and "negative." The positive side of our face works for solidarity with others, showing respect to them. It is reflected when we use politeness in our speech and say "Could you pass the salt, please" instead of saying "Pass the salt." The second sentence, a command, shows that the person is in a superior power position. This amounts to threatening the face, the public image of the person, ordered about and is therefore appropriately called **face-**

threatening act. The negative face is respecting other's right to privacy: it means not saying things which will cause embarrassment. This is what the sociologist A. Giddens says about "face-saving" and face-losing: "Much of what we usually call 'politeness' or 'etiquette' in social gatherings consists of disregarding aspects of behaviour that might otherwise lead to a 'loss of face'. . . . Tact is a protective device which each party involved employs in the expectation that, in return, their own weaknesses will not be deliberately exposed to general view."

However, the levels of politeness vary from society to society and are reflected in language. What is polite in one language may not be so in another. A foreign learner of language may mistake a question like "Excuse me, do you know the way to the bus-stand?" He may simply say "yes" and walk away, assuming that he has answered the question which was actually a request!