

lecture 9

Pragmatics

○ Pragmatics :

pragmatics is the study of what speakers mean, or “speaker meaning,”

In many ways, pragmatics is the study of “invisible” meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers (or writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provides us with some insights into how more is always being communicated than is said.

Driving by a parking garage, you may see a large sign like the one in the picture. You read the sign, knowing what each of the words means and what the sign as a whole means. However, you don’t normally think that the sign is advertising a place where you can park your “heated attendant.” (You take an attendant, you heat him/her up, and this is where you can park him/her.) Alternatively, the sign may indicate a place where parking will be carried out by attendants who have been heated. The words in the sign may allow these interpretations, but we would normally understand that we can park a car in this place, that it’s a heated area, and that there will be an attendant to look after the car. So, how do we decide that the sign means this when the sign doesn’t even have the word car on it? We must use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the “meaning” of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended to communicate.

○ Context

In our discussion of the last two examples, we emphasized the influence of context. There are different kinds of context. One kind is described as **linguistic context**, also known as **co-text**. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. The surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word probably means. In the **last chapter**, we identified the word bank as a homonym, a single form with more than one meaning. How do we usually know which meaning is intended in a particular sentence? We normally do so on the basis of linguistic context.

If the word bank is used in a sentence together with words like steep or overgrown, we have no problem deciding which type of bank is meant. Or, if we hear someone say that she has to get to the bank to withdraw some cash, we know from this linguistic context which type of bank is intended.

More generally, we know how to interpret words on the basis of **physical context**. If we see the word BANK on the wall of a building in a city, the physical location will influence our interpretation. While this may seem rather obvious, we should keep in mind that it is not the actual physical situation “out there” that constitutes “the context” for interpreting words or sentences. The relevant context is our mental representation of those aspects of what is physically out there that we use in arriving at an interpretation. Our understanding of much of what we read and hear is tied to this processing of aspects of the physical context, particularly the time and place, in which we encounter linguistic expressions.

○ Deixis

There are some very common words in our language that can’t be interpreted at all if we don’t know the context, especially the physical context of the speaker. These are words such as here and there, this or that, now and then, yesterday, today or tomorrow,

as well as pronouns such as you, me, she, him, it, them. Some sentences of English are virtually impossible to understand if we don’t know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. For example: You’ll have to bring it back tomorrow because she isn’t here today.

Out of context, this sentence is really vague. It contains a large number of expressions (you, it, tomorrow, she, here, today) that rely on knowledge of the immediate physical context for their interpretation (i.e. that the delivery driver will have to return on February 15 to 660 College Drive with the long box labeled “flowers, handle with care” addressed to Lisa Landry). Expressions such as tomorrow and here are obvious examples of bits of language that we can only understand in terms of the speaker’s intended meaning. They are technically known as **deictic** (/daɪktɪk/) expressions, from the Greek word deixis, which means “pointing” via language. We use deixis to point to things (it, this, these boxes) and people (him, them,

those idiots), sometimes called **person deixis**. Words and phrases used to point to a location (here, there, near that) are examples of **spatial deixis**, and those used to point to a time (now, then, last week) are examples of **temporal deixis**. All these deictic expressions have to be interpreted in terms of which person, place or time the speaker has in mind. We make a broad distinction between what is marked as close to the speaker (this, here, now) and what is distant (that, there, then). We can also indicate whether movement is away from the speaker's location (go) or toward the speaker's location (come). If you're looking for someone and she appears, moving toward you, you can say Here she comes!. If, however, she is moving away from you in the distance, you're more likely to say There she goes!. The same deictic effect explains the different situations in which you would tell someone to Go to bed versus Come to bed.

○ Reference

In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don't refer to anything. People refer. We have to define **reference** as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns (Chomsky, Jennifer, Whiskas), other nouns in phrases (a writer, my friend, the cat) or pronouns (he, she, it). We sometimes assume that these words identify someone or something uniquely, but it is more accurate to say that, for each word or phrase, there is a "range of reference." The words Jennifer or friend or she can be used to refer to many entities in the world. As we observed earlier, an expression such as the war doesn't directly identify anything by itself, because its reference depends on who is using it.

We can also refer to things when we're not sure what to call them. We can use expressions such as the blue thing and that icky stuff and we can even invent names. For instance, there was a man who always drove his motorcycle fast and loud through my neighborhood and was locally referred to as Mr. Kawasaki. In this case, a brand name for a motorcycle is being used to refer to a person.

○ Inference

As in the "Mr. Kawasaki" example, a successful act of reference depends more on the listener's ability to recognize what we mean than on the listener's "dictionary" knowledge of a word we use. For example, in a restaurant, one waiter can ask another, Where's the spinach salad sitting? and receive the reply, He's sitting by the door. If you're studying linguistics, you might ask someone, Can I look at your Chomsky? and get the response, Sure, it's on the shelf over there. These examples make it clear that we can use names associated with things (salad) to refer to people, and use names of people (Chomsky) to refer to things. The key process here is called **inference**. An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant. In the last example, the listener has to operate with the inference: "if X is the name of the writer of a book, then X can be used to identify a copy of a book by that writer." Similar types of inferences are necessary to understand someone who says that Picasso is in the museum or We saw Shakespeare in London or Jennifer is wearing Calvin Klein.

○ Anaphora

We usually make a distinction between introducing new referents (a puppy) and referring back to them (the puppy, it). We saw a funny home video about a boy washing a puppy in a small bath. The puppy started struggling and shaking and the boy got really wet. When he let go, it jumped out of the bath and ran away. In this type of referential relationship, the second (or subsequent) referring expression is an example of **anaphora** ("referring back"). The first mention is called the **antecedent**. So, in our example, a boy, a puppy and a small bath are antecedents and The puppy, the boy, he, it and the bath are anaphoric expressions.

○ Presupposition

When we use a referring expression like this, he or Shakespeare, we usually assume that our listeners can recognize which referent is intended. In a more general way, we design our linguistic messages on the basis of large-scale assumptions about what our listeners already know. Some of these assumptions may be mistaken, of course, but mostly they're appropriate. What a speaker (or writer) assumes is true or known by a listener (or reader) can be described as a **presupposition**.

If someone tells you Your brother is waiting outside, there is an obvious presupposition that you have a brother. If you are asked Why did you arrive late?, there is a presupposition that you did arrive late. And if you are asked the question When did you stop smoking?, there are at least two presuppositions involved. In asking this question, the speaker presupposes that you used to smoke and that you no longer do so.

○ Speech acts

We have been considering ways in which we interpret the meaning of an utterance in terms of what the speaker intended to convey. We have not yet considered the fact that we usually know how the speaker intends us to “take” (or “interpret the function of”) what is said. In very general terms, we can usually recognize the type of “action” performed by a speaker with the utterance. We use the term **speech act** to describe actions such as “requesting,” “commanding,” “questioning” or “informing.” We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance. If you say, I’ll be there at six, you are not just speaking, you seem to be performing the speech act of “promising.”

○ Direct and indirect speech acts

We usually use certain syntactic structures with the functions listed beside them in the following table.

	Structures	Functions
Did you eat the pizza?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the pizza (please)!	Imperative	Command (Request)
You ate the pizza.	Declarative	Statement

When an interrogative structure such as Did you...?, Are they...? or Can we...? is used with the function of a question, it is described as a **direct speech act**. For example, when we don’t know something and we ask someone to provide the information, we usually produce a direct speech act such as Can you ride a bicycle?.

Compare that utterance with Can you pass the salt?. In this second example, we are not really asking a question about someone’s ability. In fact, we don’t normally use this structure as a question at all. We normally use it to make a request. That is, we are using a syntactic structure associated with the function of a question, but in this case with the function of a request. This is an example of an **indirect speech act**. Whenever one of the structures in the set above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it on the same line, the result is an indirect speech act.

○ Politeness

We can think of politeness in general terms as having to do with ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. In the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is “face.” Your **face**, in pragmatics, is your public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. **Politeness** can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of another person’s face. If you say something that represents a threat to another person’s self-image, that is called a **face-threatening act**. For example, if you use a direct speech act to get someone to do something (Give me that paper!), you are behaving as if you have more social power than the other person. If you don’t actually have that social power (e.g. you’re not a military officer or prison warden), then you are performing a face threatening act. An indirect speech act, in the form associated with a question (Could you pass me that paper?), removes the assumption of social power. You’re only asking if it’s possible. This makes your request less threatening to the other person’s face. Whenever you say something that lessens the possible threat to another’s face, it can be described as a **face-saving act**.

○ Negative and positive face

We have both a negative face and a positive face. (Note that “negative” doesn’t mean “bad” here, it’s simply the opposite of “positive.”) **Negative face** is the need to be independent and free from imposition. **Positive face** is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of the group. So, a face-saving act that emphasizes a person’s negative face will show concern about imposition (I’m sorry to bother you...; I know you’re busy, but...). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person’s positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a common goal (Let’s do this together...; You and I have the same problem, so...).