Grammar, Meaning and Pragmatics: Sorting Out the Muddle

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Abstract

The term "pragmatics" is commonly used in two quite different senses. In linguistic discourse, "pragmatics" refers to the strategies (exploitation of shared knowledge, assumptions about communicative intent, etc.), by which language users relate the dictionary/grammar meaning of utterances to their communicative value in context. "Pragmatics" in this sense deals with what is not encoded in language, and applies to all language use. In language teaching, on the other hand, "pragmatics" generally refers to the encoding of particular communicative functions, especially those relevant to interpersonal exchanges, in specific grammatical and lexical elements of a given language. Confusion between the two senses leads to the common and mistaken claim that all the structures of a language encode two levels of meaning, "semantic" and "pragmatic," both of which must be learnt for communicative competence. A further common claim, that earlier language teaching failed to consider pragmatic aspects of language, is equally unfounded.

Two Kinds of Meaning

Since the early days of the Communicative Approach, language teachers have been told that they have to pay attention to two kinds of meaning: the "semantic" meanings of words and structures which can be found in dictionaries and grammars, and the "pragmatic" values which these linguistic elements take on when they are used in communication. In an influential paper published in the early 1970s (Hymes, 1971), the sociolinguist Dell Hymes put forward the view that "communicative competence" involves knowing not only dictionary/grammar meaning, but also the rules that determine the appropriacy or otherwise of utterances in context. This line of thought was welcomed for several reasons. Language teachers at the time were dissatisfied, as language teachers usually are, with their learners' inability to convert their knowledge of linguistic forms into successful language use, and the idea that they could solve the problem by teaching something called "communicative competence" was an attractive one. The construct offered an engaging alternative to the purely formal type of language competence investigated by Chomskyan linguistics. It chimed well with the concerns of many applied linguists, who were then

turning their attention from language on the page to language between people--discourse analysis was the new syntax. It added some intellectual kudos to applied linguistics by forging a link with the work of linguistic philosophers such as Searle and Austin, who were also looking, broadly speaking, at what people do with language. And, quite simply, it fitted in with the "spirit of the age," which was deeply concerned with interpersonal dynamics. So Hymes' pronouncement that there are "rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (1971, p. 278) became something of a mantra for the applied linguists of the time.

> One of the major reasons for questioning the adequacy of grammatical syllabuses lies in the fact that even when we have described the grammatical (and lexical) meaning of a sentence, we have not accounted for the way it is used as an utterance . . . . Since those things that are not conveyed by the grammar are also understood, they too must be governed by 'rules' which are known to both speaker and hearer. People who speak the same language share not so much a *grammatical* competence as a *communicative* competence. Looked at in foreign language teaching terms, this means that the learner has to learn rules of communication as well as rules of grammar. (Wilkins, 1976, pp. 10-11)

Despite the difficulty of clarifying what exactly might be meant by teaching "rules of use" or "rules of communication" (see Swan, 1985 for discussion), the notion that teachers and learners need to concern themselves with two levels of meaning has remained prominent in pedagogic thought and writing. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, in a widely used course on pedagogic grammar, explain that "Grammatical structures not only have a morphosyntactic form, they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate use (pragmatics)" (1999, p. 4). Ellis (2005), discussing the need for learners to focus on meaning, similarly distinguishes two senses of the term: semantic and pragmatic. Doughty and Williams, discussing the rationale for the task-based teaching of structure, say:

> [W]e recognize that the term meaning, which is often equated only with its lexical component, in fact subsumes lexical, semantic and pragmatic meaning. To be more accurate, we note that focus on form includes forms, meaning and function (or use) . . . . We suggest that the degree of effectiveness . . . of focus on form ultimately depends on the level of integration of the learner's attention to all three aspects of form, meaning and function in the TL. (1998, pp. 244-5)

Problems With the "Two Levels of Meaning" Notion

The idea that we should be teaching two kinds of meaning is so familiar that we can easily fail to see how problematic it actually is. Stated in general terms, the claim does indeed seem quite plausible. We know very well that the exact significance of an utterance in communication can be different from the apparent meanings of the words and structures involved. *What do you think you're doing?* is probably not a simple enquiry about the hearer's mental processes. *I thought we might go out for a drink* refers to the present, not the past. Problems arise, however, when we try to focus on what exactly is meant, in practice, by saying that in general the structures of a language have both semantic and pragmatic meanings, and that these can be taught. Larsen-Freeman, while encouraging teachers to deal with both 'meaning and

use' in grammar (2003, pp. 35-42), concedes that for some structures the two can be difficult to tease apart. They certainly can. Plural morphology encodes reference to more than one entity: is this meaning or use? Whichever it is, where is the other? The English future perfect refers to anteriority in the future; if this is meaning, what is the use of the tense? The modal *must* can express both certainty and obligation; but if one of these is meaning and the other use, which is which? Some grammatical elements, indeed, do not seem to have any kind of meaning. Attributive adjectives normally precede nouns in English and follow them in French, but it is hard to assign any semantic value to this structural fact. English quantifiers are followed by *of* before another determiner (*some of those people*), but not before a bare noun (*some people*); again, it seems unrealistic to ask what this "means." And what is the "meaning" of gender agreement in French, or of the verb-second rule in German?

Why?

If the idea that grammatical structures intrinsically have two distinguishable kinds of meaning, "semantic" and "pragmatic," is fundamentally flawed (as I think it is), why has it persisted for so long? I believe that this has a good deal to do with a widespread and continuing confusion about what exactly is meant by "pragmatic." Although the term "pragmatics," relating loosely to the study of "how we do things with language," is pervasive in discussions of language teaching, it can be very hard to pin down exactly what people mean by it, or how it relates to syntax, lexis and semantics. Essentially, I think that this is because the term actually has two very different kinds of reference that are often tangled up one with the other. Let's call these "Pragmatics A" and "Pragmatics B."

Pragmatics A: What Is Not Encoded

When we encode an utterance, our hearer or reader can use dictionary/grammar knowledge to decode it to the point of establishing its meaning in a kind of general-purpose sense. But (as we are constantly reminded) the dictionary/grammar meaning of any utterance underdetermines its meaning in context: its "value", or the role it plays in the ongoing communication. To understand a sentence like *Your driver will be here in half an hour*, a hearer needs to feed a good deal of extra information into the utterance: the fact that in this instance the variable *your* refers to the hearer him/herself; the exact identity of the driver in question; the location of *here*; and the time frame within which *in half an hour* has to be calculated. None of this information is encoded in the grammar and semantics of the sentence itself. The sentence *I still haven't forgiven her for the thing about the hedgehog and the music stand* depends for its interpretation on shared knowledge that is in no way expressed by the language forms used. Correct interpretations of utterances can indeed take us a very long way away from their surface encodings. In specific situations the following sentences, for example, might be used to convey the messages shown in brackets (or other very different ones), and be successfully understood as doing so.

- *Your coat's on the floor.* ('Pick up your coat.')
- *Jane's got her exams on Friday.* ('I can't come to lunch.')
- *Let's not have a repetition of last time.* ('Don't get drunk and start flirting with Melissa.')
- *It's Wednesday.* ('Put the trash out.')

The linguistic discipline known as Pragmatics (what I am here calling "Pragmatics A") takes this kind of problem as its principal subject matter. Textbooks on pragmatics (e.g., Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996; Horn & Ward, 2004) concern themselves centrally with the principles used by speakers/writers and hearers/readers to bridge the gap between code meaning and context-determined meaning. Such works typically discuss, among other things:

- the way context, shared knowledge, and familiarity with conventional schemata, routines and genres all contribute to meaning, and are taken into account in framing and interpreting utterances.
- the "co-operative principle" underlying successful communication, whereby speakers and writers normally avoid saying too much or too little, give true information, say what is relevant, and aim at clarity of expression (the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner identified by the philosopher Grice).
- "implicature"--the ways in which the flouting of these maxims can be interpreted (e.g., damning with faint praise, showing off, exaggeration for emphasis, irony, metaphor).

By definition, Pragmatics A is concerned primarily with what is not encoded, and its analytical categories are applicable to every act of communication: there is surely no sentence which has an absolute universal value totally independent of the personal and situational context in which it is uttered.

Pragmatics B: What Is Encoded

When language teachers talk about "pragmatics," however, they are not generally thinking about the branch of linguistics discussed above, or the topics that this is mainly concerned with. By virtue of being efficient communicators in their mother tongues, students already know how to relate code to context so as to determine the communicative intention of a given utterance, and the strategies and principles involved are to a great extent universal and language-independent. Certainly, there are some culture-specific differences--for example, one culture may value silence, indirectness or the overt expression of respect more than another. But by and large, Pragmatics A, dealing as it does with what is not encoded, is outside the scope of the language classroom.

"Pragmatics," for language teachers, is to do with what is encoded. Languages do not leave their speakers to grapple unaided with the problem of bridging the gap between the dictionary/grammar meanings of utterances and their precise value in communicative contexts. All languages provide ways of reducing the problem by labelling, in general terms, the typical communicative roles that utterances can take on. So we can encode linguistically the fact that that we are asking a question, or expressing doubt, or adding information, or showing respect, or making an objection, or exaggerating. It is these language-specific features--what I am calling "Pragmatics B"--that are of direct concern to language teachers. Pragmatics B deals with questions like the following:

- How are common speech acts encoded in the target language? How does one ask questions, make requests, express respect, invite, interrupt, etc?
- Are there cross-language differences in the distribution of speech acts? Does L2

mark a logical contrast overtly while L1 leaves it to be interpreted from the context? Does L1, unlike L2, have an answer form that indicates that the speaker has asked a stupid question? Does one language go overboard for respect while the other only makes a few gestures in that direction? Do speakers necessarily have to use politeness markers in one of the languages, but not the other, when asking a question; or is there a default interrogative structure that will do unless one needs to be especially polite (as in English)?

- What are the false friends? Does a negative question work for making requests in L1 but not in L2? Does the equivalent of *Have you eaten?* mean "Have you eaten?", or does it mean 'How are you?' or something else? Is the equivalent of *Please* used in L2, but not in L1, when offering something or replying to thanks?

Pragmatics B is not easy to delineate clearly. The kind of topics listed above are often grouped in a general way under the heading "doing things with language." But where does one draw the line? If making requests, issuing invitations and enquiring about health are "doing things with language," then so presumably are defining things, predicting the weather and talking about computers. Another common definition of pragmatics in language teaching characterises it as being concerned with "the choices that users of a particular language make when using the forms of the language in communication" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999, pp. 4-5). But of course all use of language involves choices: we do not use the same words to talk about cars as to talk about flowers, or the same structures to refer to the past as we do to refer to the future.

Whatever the problems of definition, though, language teachers and pedagogic writers find it convenient in practice to use the term "pragmatics" mainly with reference to two areas where the roles that utterances can take on are perhaps especially in need of linguistic labelling. These are:

1. The construction of spoken exchanges, where interpersonal aspects of communication involving respect, face etc are often key issues, so that languages tend to have quite complex ways of framing utterances to ensure that speakers' intentions are not misinterpreted.
2. The construction of written text, where failure to interpret the flow of argument may cause misunderstanding, and where the use of devices such as structuring conventions, anaphoric elements and discourse markers can facilitate interpretation.

This, then, is the domain of Pragmatics B: not (as with Pragmatics A) the whole of a linguistic system, but the subset of linguistic structures which encode the particular types of meaning just referred to.

The Confusion

The common claim that all structures have two kinds of meaning, both of which we need to teach, seems to derive from a simple confusion between these two different versions of "pragmatics". Certainly, we can agree that all utterances have not only dictionary/grammar meanings but also separate context-determined values in use (Pragmatics A). However, we cannot legitimately import this generalisation into a

discussion of pragmatic encodings (Pragmatics B). Context-determined values are features of utterances; they are not encoded in the structures used to create these utterances, and do not therefore give rise to structure-specific 'rules of use' which can be taught. English passives, for example, can be used to imply agency without stating it directly, and this can be exploited for the pragmatic purpose of making veiled criticisms. But, as Batstone points out we cannot relate this insight very closely to specific contexts. While the sentence: *The windows haven't been cleaned for months* may be uttered with the intention of causing embarrassment or hurt, "it would appear odd to assert that the passive can be used to cause embarrassment or hurt in domestic disputes concerning the cleaning of windows" (1994, p. 14).

A crucial point is that, as pointed out above, those pragmatic encodings that can be taught (and which are therefore relatively context-independent) are not by any means found in all the elements of a language. Pragmatics B, unlike Pragmatics A, has limited and partial scope. This is easy to see with lexis. While some words and expressions encode centrally pragmatic functions (for example *Please, Dear Sir* or *Feel free*), others encode no pragmatics at all (for example *dishwasher, marinate* or *in time*). Yet others have both pragmatic and non-pragmatic functions: *this* can be used not only to indicate physical or temporal proximity, but also to clarify the linking of items in text; *certainly*, as well as conveying definiteness, can label a concessive move in an argument (*Certainly, she did some good work at the beginning. But . . .*). The situation is exactly the same for grammatical structures. Imperatives perform a variety of pragmatic functions, labelling their associated utterances as being for example commands, requests, or invitations. In contrast, plural morphology in English nouns has no pragmatic significance: its function is purely semantic. Plural morphology in French pronouns and verbs, on the other hand, can encode either semantic meaning (reference to more than one thing or person), or pragmatic meaning (where using the second-person plural to address a single person expresses respect by metaphorically aggrandising the addressee).

If not all structures can be exploited for purposes that we might reasonably call pragmatic, there are certainly very many structures which can be, as research by construction grammarians and others is making increasingly clear--see for example Goldberg (1995), Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999), Green (2004), Kay (2004). Even where structures do have more than one kind of potential function, however, the distinction between "meaning" and "use," or "semantic" and "pragmatic" meaning seems somewhat artificial, and it is not always easy to operationalize. As pointed out earlier, the two main senses of English *must* do not seem to fit neatly into the two slots. For another example, take the past tenses in the following sentences:

1. *I **saw** Oliver yesterday.*
2. *Only 18? I thought you **were** older.*
3. *If I **had** time I'd do a lot more reading.*
4. *I think it's time we **went** home.*
5. *If you **had** a moment, I wouldn't mind a bit of help.*
6. *How much **did** you want to spend?*

We can if we wish describe the tense in 1) as having a "literal meaning," referring as it does simply to past time, and the tense in 6) as involving a "pragmatic use" of the past form for polite distancing. But what about the others? It seems difficult to assign the various intertwined nuances of time reference, hypotheticality, and

interpersonal indirectness to one or other category. In the case of such polyvalent items, it would be simpler, surely, to abandon the notion of a two-part division between "meaning" and "use," and simply say that the structures have several different functions.

Conclusion

Looking at the conceptualisation of pragmatics in language teaching that developed during the communicative revolution of the 1970s and that is still very much with us, I cannot help feeling that, in the words of the old cliché, what was true wasn't new and what was new wasn't true. It has always been considered important for students to learn how the language they are studying encodes the most important pragmatic functions, even if the heavily structure-based pre-communicative language courses of forty years ago were not always very good at teaching these systematically. The interest of the last few decades in various dimensions of "language in use" has certainly expanded our knowledge of how languages work, and our concern to approximate real-life language use in the classroom has greatly improved our teaching methodology. However, it is irritating to be told, as one often is, that the pragmatic dimension of language, "language in use" or "grammar as choice," is a recent discovery, unknown before the advent of the communicative approach, or even (as is sometimes implied in contemporary academic and pedagogic writing) neglected before the researches of the author and his or her colleagues.

> Most grammars have focused on structure, describing the form and (sometimes) meaning of grammatical constructions out of context. They have not described how forms and meanings are actually used in spoken and written discourse. (Biber et al., 2002, p. 2)

(Note the interesting suggestion that in the bad old days we did not teach even semantic meaning most of the time, concealing from our students the potentially inflammatory information that plural nouns refer to more than one entity, that past tenses are prototypically used to refer to past time, and that forms like *older* and *more beautiful* express comparison.)

Here is Gurrey, writing about language teaching in the mid-fifties:

> [I]t is comparatively easy to memorize grammatical forms, but difficult to master the usage of those forms. And it is of no value at all to know all the Tense forms of a Verb, unless one knows also which Tense to use. It is more useful to know when to say "Have you finished that letter?" and when to say "Did you finish that letter?" than to know the Principal Parts of the Verb 'to finish'. (1955, p. 71)

Billows, writing a few years later about how a teacher might approach the simple present tense, gives an impressively long list of the various kinds of reference that the tense can have in communication (1961, pp. 166-7). If it is felt that this is not exactly "pragmatics," then consider the language functions covered in lessons 1-8 of a typical structure-based course of the 1960s (Candlin, 1968). They include: greeting, enquiring about health, leave-taking, thanking, expressing regret, eliciting and giving information, offering, requesting goods and services, proffering, self-identification, asking for more precise information, confirming what has been said, exhortation,

identifying and naming, agreeing to carry out instructions, and enquiring about plans.

And here is the very first lesson of another popular English course of the 1960s (Alexander, 1967):

MAN:	Excuse me.
WOMAN:	Yes?
MAN:	Is this your handbag?
WOMAN:	Pardon?
MAN:	Is this your handbag?
WOMAN:	Yes, it is. Thank you very much.

(Text accompanied by illustrations of a woman leaving her handbag on a train)

It would be hard to find a better demonstration of how to integrate the teaching of structure and pragmatic use at beginners' level.

As a glance at any history of language teaching (e.g., Howatt & Widdowson, 2004) will show, "language in use" has been taught, well or badly, since languages were first studied. The recent construct of a distinct "communicative competence," separate from ordinary language knowledge and skills, that can be taught by focusing on how all the forms of a language "are actually used in spoken and written discourse," is in my view a chimera, based on a confused understanding of what is meant by "pragmatics". It is certainly important to make sure that students understand the various ways--pragmatic or not--in which the principal structures of a language can be used, and that they become proficient in these uses. But to approach this goal by encouraging teachers to try to identify and teach as separate items the "meaning" and "use" of all grammatical structures is in my view to send them on a wild goose chase.

About the Author

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