International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research

Research Article

Pragmatics: Historical Development, Scope and Subject Matter or Object of Study

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Abstract

Keywords

pragmatics,
semantics,
discourse analysis.

This paper explores and exposes the historical development, scope and subject matter or object of study of Pragmatics as well as explaining with relevant data how pragmatics, Semantics and Discourse Analysis handle the study of meaning in language. Pragmatics, which is a branch of linguistics concerned with the use of language in social context, did not just appear in the study of language like a 'ghost' but has a historical origin, a scope that it covers, and a subject matter. In addition, this research, apart from arming us with the information on the origin, scope and subject matter of Pragmatics, had gone a step further to tell us how Pragmatics, in conjunction with Semantics, which is the study of the meaning of linguistic expression, and Discourse Analysis, which is the study of the ways in which language is used in texts and contexts, deal with the study of meaning in language at different levels, as separate disciplines of English and Linguistics.

Introduction

History is an interminable interaction between the present and the past, and it sheds the light of the past upon the future, hence the need to know the historical origin of pragmatics. As a matter of fact, knowing the historical development of Pragmatics as a language course, brought about by the efforts of early scholars to popularize it as it is today, as well as their concerted attempts to broaden its scope, as we will see in this paper, is very crucial to us as students and scholars of English/Linguistics.

Historical Development of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of 'invisible' meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said (or written) (Yule, 1996:127). In other words, Pragmatics is the study of language according to contexts. Although Pragmatics is a relatively new branch of linguistics, its historical development dates

back to ancient Greek and Roman academic works where the terms '*pragmaticus*' is found in late Latin and '*pragmaticos*' in Greek, both mean being 'pragmatical'. This is credited to some great philosophers, who, at that time had started discussing something related to Pragmatics and, for this; we can say that Pragmatics develops from philosophy. Why?

First, the term "Pragmatics" first appears in linguistic philosophy in 1930s, for then, western philosophers have begun to shift their focus on studies of language symbols, which develops into Semiology later. Early Pragmatics is just a branch of Semiology under philosophers' studies and this shows clearly that it originates from their (philosophers') study of language.

Second, the theoretic basis for Pragmatics is from philosophy. To be more specific, Pragmatics originates from the following aspects: the study of Semiology, the

study of linguistic Philosophy in 20th century and the study of functional Linguistics on language forms. *Third*, the main studies of Pragmatics such as indexicality and presupposition also have philosophical background.

At this juncture, it is necessary to mention some philosophers who have played very important roles in the development of Pragmatics. They include Wittgenstein, Morris, Austin, Searle, Levinson, Leech, Pierce, Carnap, Grice, and so on. Wittgenstein and Austin had once discussed the origin of Pragmatics in England, France and Germany in 1930s. On his part, Morris who had played the most important role in the first stage of the development of Pragmatics holds an opinion that the study must involve the aspects of society, of psychology, of nerve, of culture and other things that affect the symbols and their meanings. In fact, the most influential thing he did on Pragmatics in 1938 was his division of Semiology into three parts: Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics.

Also, the famous philosopher, Carnap, had very similar ideas with Morris but made some supplement. He suggested that the study of Pragmatics should have relationship between language users and words as well as the reference of words. By this, he makes the aims of the study of Pragmatics more specific. In addition, Bar-Hiller, the student of Carnap, suggested that studies of Pragmatics should have definite aims and he claims that the definite aims should be deictic, such as "I", "Here", "Now".

On their part, Austin and Searle put forward the Speech Act Theory, which is the most influential topic in the study of Pragmatics. Grice also made contribution to the study of speech act theory but famous for his conversational implicature. Furthermore, the writings and publications of the *journal of Pragmatics* in Holland by Mey and Haberman in 1977, *Pragmatics and Principles of Pragmatics* by Levinson and Leech in 1983 and the establishment of International Pragmatic Association (IPrA) in 1987 at Antwerp, Belgium, are considered the most important issues for the development of Pragmatics and these indicate that Pragmatics has become an independent discipline in Linguistics.

According to Mey (2001:4), the linguistic discipline of Pragmatics emerged as a result of the troubled relationship of language with logic, as originally evidenced in the realm of syntax, and subsequently also in that of semantics. Then it was upheld that linguistic description must be syntax-based or at least syntax-oriented so as to be valid. It turned out that extrasyntactic or extralinguistic factors played a major role in what was called the 'rules of the language'. Furthermore, there were difficulties of how to interpret and treat certain assumptions referred to as *presuppositions*, which guide our understanding of language, and yet could not be easily formulated in any of the available frameworks (i.e. syntax and semantics). Still from the syntactic angle, Mey (2001:20) reports that Chomsky (1957) through his notorious example: *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously* points out that this sentence is perfectly correct but strictly meaningless because the meaning of *green*, which is a colour, is cancelled out by *colourless*. Since syntax has nothing to do with meaning, such consideration is meaningless too, and should be left to people dealing with meaning, the semanticists. In this way, semantics came to be called the *waste-basket* of syntax. However, the semantic basket was filled to the brim, and another waste-basket had to be created to catch the overflow. As time went by, linguists kept dropping more and more of their unresolved questions into this new, pragmatic basket, giving rise to the linguistic discipline of Pragmatics.

Lastly, Pragmatics has been developing very quickly and soundly since the 1980s. So far, it has made some delightful progress, and attracted more and more students as well as scholars to conduct researches in it. The present Pragmatics has developed new branches which include: Inter-language Pragmatics, Cross-cultural Pragmatics, Pragmatics and Translation, Pragmatics and Language Teaching which is divided into two groups: Pragmalinguistics and Sociopragmatics, Cognitive Pragmatics and Clinical Pragmatics (www.lintroduction.com).

The Scope of Pragmatics

Scope here means the areas to which the study of Pragmatics has been extended. For purposes of this work, it is needful to mention that the term linguistic Pragmatics as popularly used today is far more restricted than the term "Pragmatics" when it was first used by Charles Morris (1938). Morris has a great deal of interest in Semiotics which is the general study of signs and symbols. Pragmatics had been defined as the "study of the relation of signs to interpreters". Morris then extends the scope of pragmatics to include psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs (Levinson, 1983). Today, this will cover other areas of study such as Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Neurolinguistics, etc. Currently, linguistic pragmatics majorly dwells on those factors of language use that govern the choice individuals make in

social interaction and the effect of those choices on others (Crystal, 1987:120).

Be that as it may, expanded researchers in cultural studies and social discourse argue in favour of discourse pragmatics rather than the traditional linguistic pragmatics. For example, Fairlough (1989) argues that rather than see language use as a person's strategies of encoding meaning to gain some particular effects on the hearer, or reader, we should be concerned with the fact that social conventions and ideologies, define peoples' roles, identities and language performance, that is, people simply communicate in some particular ways as the society determines. While people can manipulate language to achieve certain purposes, they in some circumstances are actually ruled by social conventions.

Furthermore, pragmatic study has thrown some light on the study of Literature, especially figures of speech such as hyperbole, personification, and euphemism and so on, giving rise to literary pragmatics. In a similar vein, the application of Pragmatics to computational linguistics has also developed into computational pragmatics (www.nou.edu.ng. pp.21-22)

The subject matter or Object of study of Pragmatics

Pragmatics studies the use of language in contexts, and the context – dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation, therefore, the subject matter or the object of study of Pragmatics is context. This is established by Stalnaker (1972) as captured by Jiang Yan (2005): "Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed … and these contextual features are the subject matter of pragmatics". Simply put, context can be defined as the totality of conditions that may influence the understanding and generation of communicative behaviour (Bunt, p.99).

That context is the subject matter of Pragmatics underscores its overall importance and as such, it is never an overstatement to say that context is Pragmatics and Pragmatics is context. Speaking along this line, Mey (2001:45) asserts, 'Pragmatically speaking, the decisive importance of context is that it allows us to use our linguistic resources to the utmost, without having to spell out all the tedious details every time we use a particular construction'. Continuing, he says 'context is vitally important not only in assigning the proper values to reference and implicature…but also in dealing with other pragmatic issues… such as the pragmatic act, presupposition etc.' (p.41). Context is dynamic, not a static concept: it is to be understood as the continually

changing surroundings, in the widest sense that enables the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible (Mey, 2001:39).

Types of context

We shall distinguish three main types of contextual information:

(i)   **Physical Context:** This encompasses what is physically present around the speakers/ hearers at the time of communication. What objects are visible, where the communication is taking place, what is going on around, etc. For example :

(a)   I want **that** book (accompanying by pointing).
(b)   Be **here** at 9:00 **tonight** (place/time reference).

(ii)   **Linguistic Context:** (also called co-text): This refers to what has been said before in the conversation, or the 'history' of things said so far. For example:

(a)   I can't believe you **said that!**
(b)   If my Mama heard you talk **like that,** she would wash all your mouths out with soap.

(iii)   **Social context**: This refers to the social relationship of the people involved in communication. For instance:

(a)
Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home. (This sentence is only shocking because you cannot talk like this to the President of the US).
(b)   I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavour to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs. (Bizarre if said to a friend instead of "call me when you go home") Kuthy (2002:3-4).

The use of contextual information for interpreting utterances *qua* function is also the basis of dealing with indirect speech acts and other pragmatic issues as pointed out earlier. Let us consider few of them briefly, for example:

Presupposition: This refers to what the writer assumes is true or is known by the hearer. If someone asks a hearer: *When did you stop smoking Cigars*? There are two presuppositions involved in this question: one, the speaker presupposes that the hearer used to smoke cigars, two, that he no longer does so. It is the contextual information shared by the two interlocutors that is

brought to bear on the meaning as grasped by the hearer (Yule, 1996:132)

Illocutionary act (under speech acts) that is performed as a result of the speaker making an utterance – the cases where 'saying' = 'doing', such as betting, promising, welcoming, warning, etc. For example:

You are fired!
War is hereby declared!
I baptize you (Crystal, 1987:121)

Again, context is the force behind the illocutionary effect or force of the above sentences.

Conversational implicature: It concerns the way we understand an utterance in a conversation in accordance with what we expect to hear. Thus, if we ask a question, a response which on the face of it doesn't make 'sense' can very well be an adequate answer. For instance, if a person asks me**:**

What time is it?

It makes perfectly good sense for me to answer:

The bus just went by'…(Mey, 2001:46-47).

There is usually no connection between the above question and the answer but the mutual understanding between the interlocutors concerned, once again lends credence to the powerful influence of context.

Pre-sequences: Being one of the pragmatic strategies for avoidance of explicitness in language, means pre-sequence before an action. That is, before a speaker acts with words, he first verifies the facts by making inquiry so as to confirm whether he should conduct a certain speech act to the other party. Pre-sequences are the most typical conversational structure mode for implementation of such "perlocutionary force" as "request", "invitation" and "announcement". For example:

A: *Are you going out tomorrow*?
B: *No, I have to finish my homework*.
A: *May I borrow your bike, then*?
B: *Sure* (Chen, 2010:148).

There are a host of other pragmatics issues. This is just to mention but a few. Note that context brings out the beauty of Pragmatics. From the foregoing, it is very obvious that the influence of context is very prominent in the subject matter or object of study of Pragmatics.

Explaining with Relevant Data How Pragmatics, Semantics and Discourse Analysis Study Meaning in Language

Semantics, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis occupy a pivotal position in the study of language. The entire study of language is hinged on these three including Syntax, and their ability to study meaning at different levels as disciplines in English and Linguistics has led to the emergence of other areas like Psycholinguistics and Sociolinguistics.

Before we proceed, it is necessary we define these terms briefly: *Semantics* is the study of meaning of words, phrases and sentences. While *Pragmatics* can be defined simply as the study of meaning in context, *Discourse Analysis* is any stretch of meaningful linguistic units produced for communication, which includes making sense of what we read in texts, understanding what speakers mean despite what they say, and taking part in a conversation (Yule, 1996 p.139). Sometimes, Discourse Analysis is defined as the analysis of language "beyond the sentence".

In spite of their different disciplinary backgrounds and diversity of methods as well as object of investigation, *Pragmatics, Semantics and Discourse Analysis* all deal with the study of meaning in language in conjunction with other linguistic sub – disciplines of semiotics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. They have at least seven dimensions in common as outlined below:

- An interest in the properties of '*naturally occurring' language used* by real language users (instead of a study of abstract language systems and mere invented examples).
- A focus on *larger units than isolated words and sentences* and hence, new basic units of analysis which include texts, discourses, conversations, speech acts or communicative events.
- The extension of linguistics *beyond sentence grammar* towards a study of action and interaction.
- The extension to *non-verbal (semiotic, multimodal, visual) aspects* of interaction and communication and these include gestures, images, films, the internet and multimedia.
- A focus on dynamic (socio) – cognitive, interactional moves and strategies.
- The study of the functions of (social, cultural, situative and cognitive) *contexts of language*.
- An analysis of a vast number of *phenomena of text grammar, and language use*, and these are coherence, anaphora, topics, macrostructures,

speech acts, interactions, rhetoric, mental models and many other aspects of text and discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2008:2).

The data

There are myriads of data in English showing how Pragmatics, Semantics and Discourse Analysis study meaning at different levels. Therefore, we shall make reference to few of them, as follows:

❖ *Speech acts in Pragmatics*: The use of the term speech act covers 'actions' such as 'requesting' 'commanding', 'questioning' and 'informing' (J. R. Searle, 1976).

According to Austin (1962) as quoted by Shaozhong Liu (2003:10), "we are all social beings, and our behaviour to each other always turns out as a social act and hence bears a social meaning or effect. Living as social beings, we say things not merely for the sake or fun of saying them, but rather possess a behind-the-scene purpose or intent". In other words, in what we normally say, we are simultaneously performing certain acts. Austin further distinguishes three acts in one single speech act or event we perform. These include: an *illocutionary act*, which involves saying things out; a *locutionary act*, which deals with encoding an intent in the act of saying things out; and a *perlocutionary act* which involves response to the saying act of the speaker from the audience.

It is typically the case that we use the following linguistic forms with the following functions in English as illustrated below:

	Forms	Functions
Did you eat the food?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the food (please).	Imperative	Command
You ate the food.	Declarative	Statement

(Yule, 1996:132-133)

❖ *Semantic features in Semantics*: Semantic features are basic features involved in differentiating meanings of each word in the language from every other word. Here, we consider the component of meaning which a word (e.g. noun) has and we use it to describe part of its meaning as either plus (+) or minus (-) the feature. So, the feature can be + *animate* (= denotes an animate being or – *animate* (= does not denote an animate being) more so, it can be + *human* (a human being) or – *human* (not a human being), etc. For example, if we are asked to give the crucial distinguishing features of the meaning of this set of English words: *table, cow, girl, woman, boy, man*, we can do so by means of the following diagram:

	Table	Cow	Girl	Woman	Boy	Man
Animate	-	+	+	+	+	+
Human	-	-	+	+	+	+
Male	-	-	-	-	+	+
Adult	-	-	-	+	-	+

From a feature analysis like this, we can say that at least part of the basic meaning of the word boy in English involves the components (+ *human*, + *male*, - *adult*).

Semantic Roles

Instead of thinking of words as 'containers' of meaning, we can look at the 'roles' they perform within the situation described by a sentence. If the situation is a simple event, such as *The boy kicked the ball*, then the verb describes an action (*kick*). The noun phrases describe the roles of the entities, such as people and things involved in the action. We can identify a small number of semantic roles for these noun phrases.

In the sentence above, one role is taken by *the boy* as 'the entity that performs the action', technically known as the **agent.** Another role is taken by *the ball* as 'the entity that is involved in or affected by the action', technically known as the **theme.** Although agents are typically human or animate, they can also be non-human forces, e.g. *The wind blew the ball away*, *The car ran over the ball*. Other semantic roles are: experiencer, location, source, goal, etc.

Apart from the fact that words are not just treated as 'containers' or as fulfilling 'roles', they can also have 'relationship', hence, lexical relations of words. Below are few examples: **Synonymy**: Synonyms are two or more forms with very closely related meanings, which are often, but not always intersubstitutable in sentences. Examples of these are the pairs *broad – wide, hide – conceal, almost – nearly, cab – taxi, liberty – freedom, answer – reply,* etc. **Antonymy**: Antonyms are two forms with opposite meanings. The common examples are the pairs *quick – slow, big – small, long – short, rich – poor, happy – sad, hot – cold, young – old,* etc. **Hyponymy:** When the meaning of one form is included in the meaning of another, the relationship is described as hyponymy. Some typical example pairs are: *daffodil – flower, dog – animal, carrot – vegetable,* etc. The concept of 'inclusion' involved here is the idea that if any object is a *daffodil,* it is necessarily a *flower,* so the meaning of *flower* is 'included' in the meaning of *daffodil*. Others are: *prototypes, homonymy, polysemy, metonymy,* etc. (Yule, 1996:116 – 122).

❖ *Topic of conversation (under conversation) in Discourse Analysis*: The topic of the conversation is an important variable. In general, it should be one with which everyone feels at ease: 'safe' topics between strangers in English situations usually include the weather, pets, children, and the local context (e.g. while waiting in a room or queue); 'unsafe' topics include religious and political beliefs and problems of health. There are some arbitrary divisions: asking for what someone does for a living is generally safe but asking how much they earn is not (Crystal, 1987:117).

Interpreting Discourse

When we concentrate on the description of a particular language, we are normally concerned with the accurate representation of the forms and structures used in that language. However, as language-users, we are capable of more than simply recognizing correct versus incorrect form and structure. We can cope with fragments such as *Trains collide, two die,* a newspaper headline, and know, for example, that a causal relationship exists between the two phrases. We can also make sense of notices like *No shoes, no service,* on shop windows in summer, understanding that a conditional relation exists between the two phrases ('If you are wearing no shoes, you will receive no service').

Cohesion in Discourse

Texts must have a certain structure which depends on factors quite different from those required in the structure of a single sentence. Some of such factors are described in terms of cohesion, or the ties and connections which exist between texts.

Analysis of these *cohesive links* within a text gives us some insight into how writers structure what they want to say, and they may be crucial factors in our judgements on whether something is well-written or not. It has been noted that the conventions of cohesive structure differ from one language to the other and may be one of the sources of difficulty encountered in translating texts.

Coherence in Discourse

The key to the concept of coherence is not something which exists in the language, but something which exists in people. It is people who 'make sense' of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation which is in line with their experience of the way the world is. Indeed, our ability to make sense of what we read is probably only a small part of that general ability we have to make sense of what we perceive or experience in the world.

When we read, we keep trying to make the text 'fit' some situation or experience which would accommodate all details. In doing this, we would necessarily be involved in a process of filling in a lot of 'gaps' which exists in a text (Yule, 1996:139 – 142).

Events and Situations

- *Speech events in Pragmatics*: In exploring what it is that we know about taking part in conversation, or any other speech event (e.g. debate, interview, various types of discussions), we quickly realize that there is enormous variation in what people say, and do in different circumstances. In order to begin to describe the sources of that variation, we would have to take account of number of criteria. For example, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer, or hearers, and their relationships, whether they were friends, strangers, young, old, of equal or unequal status, and many other factors. All these factors will have an influence on what is said and how it is said (Yule, 1996:143).

- *Participants in the situation in Discourse Analysis*: Firth (1935) as quoted by Olateju, (1998:3), made a built-up of Malinowski's notion of context situation in which he (Firth) wanted the concept that could be used for the study of texts as part of a general linguistic theory. He developed the following situations in linguistic theory, as follows:

➢ *The participants in the situation*: what Firth referred to as persons and personalities, corresponding more or less to what sociologists would regard as the statuses and roles of the participants;
➢ *The action of the participants*: what they are doing including both their verbal action and non- verbal action;
➢ *Other relevant features of the situation*: the surrounding objects and events, in so far as they have some bearing on what is going on (Halliday and Hasan 1985:8) as recorded by (Olateju, 1998:3).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted in no small measure to arm the reader with vital knowledge and information about the historical development, the scope and the subject matter of the linguistic field of Pragmatics. Aside this, it has also made a concerted effort through the provision of relevant data to explain how pragmatics, semantics and discourse analysis interrelate to study meaning in language. By these, it has contributed to knowledge as far as language study is concerned.

Therefore, it will continue to be of great use to students, language scholars and even language enthusiasts any time anywhere.

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