

The pragmatics environment: trends and perspectives ¹

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Abstract

The boundaries between pragmatics, sociolinguistics and other language sciences are imprecise, and cannot easily be described in categorical terms given the interdisciplinary nature that characterises scientific progress. Alongside traditional subject areas which have been very present over the course of the entire history of pragmatics (speech acts, deixis, presupposition and inference, modality...), there have been others that have come to the fore more recently (for instance, politeness) or are complete newcomers (multimodality, or the confluence between different channels and communicative codes). The different pragmatic theories face the challenge of synthesising what has often been called the *pragmatics outlook*, to reduce excessive diversity, resulting in vagueness or imprecision often attributed to the discipline.

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1. Introduction

Mindful of the prototypic readership of this journal, and paraphrasing the title of a book well known on logic for linguists (not to mention a Woody Allen film), this article ought to have been entitled “all that a sociolinguist wanted to know about pragmatics... but didn't dare ask”. But this would hardly have been fair, although pragmatists and sociolinguists continue to be two quite independent trades, the connections between the two are quite obvious, and it's not difficult to think of famous names that could be placed in either *band*. These connections have meant that pragmatics has made its own a good part of the *findings* of sociolinguistics. Less obviously, perhaps, sociolinguistics has tended to take up not a few of the new issues and challenges (new, that is, from *its* perspective) coming from pragmatics.

Another paraphrase, this time of a famous quote from Roman Jakobson: if we were to accept that nothing linguistic is foreign to us, perhaps we could also admit, firstly, that the sociolinguistic point of view cannot be foreign to pragmatics (we run the risk, otherwise, of creating a sort of *angelic* or a-social, grammar-like pragmatics) and secondly, that the pragmatics point of view has to be included in sociolinguistics and its approaches (to avoid a sociolinguistics bereft of communicative phenomena).

2. The pragmatic view: precedents and origins

What has come to be called the pragmatic *outlook* or *perspective*, as a term with a deliberately wide meaning, is to be seen, not so much as a discipline with a particular orientation, but as a confluence of trends or *currents*, all having many and various origins

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(cf. Levinson 1983, Verschueren, Östman and Blommaert (eds.) 1995, Mey (ed.) 1998, Verschueren 1999).

The oldest of these would be classical rhetoric, with obvious emphasis on oral discourse; the philosophy of language, many centuries later, would be one of the most recent, along with an interest in the theory of human action, resulting in speech act theory (J. L. Austin, J. R. Searle).

Where questions of grammar were the point of departure, the route that led to pragmatics was variously through the inadequacy of semantic theory (when confronted with the problem of context of use), or the desire to argue for functionalist approaches (in M. A. K. Halliday's work, for example) that took account of linguistic variation. The latter converged, in practice, with developments in interactional sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics and the ethnography of communication (D. Hymes and J. J. Gumperz).

Other narrower or more specific disciplines also paved the way for pragmatics. Enunciation theory for instance (R. Jakobson, E. Benveniste), and psycholinguistic and cognitive theories (L. S. Vygotsky). The fields of text linguistics and discourse analysis also come into being, alongside pragmatics, and the interrelationships between all these are multiple.

Lastly, semiotics (with its interest in the study of signs and communication), has always been cited as one of the main roads leading to pragmatics, above all, thanks to the work of Ch. S. Peirce and Ch. W. Morris, both in the North American tradition, and of M.M. Bakhtin in the Soviet tradition (more allied to literary criticism). To Peirce, reformulated by Morris, we owe what is arguably the most usual conception and definition of pragmatics, complementary to syntax and semantics, which analyses the relationship between signs and users or users.

This definition, while criticised for its vagueness, constitutes a way of centring pragmatics, at least in general terms *by intension*-- that is, by naming the criterion according to which objects do, or do not, form part of the whole (in this case all that refers to language use). Other more specific criteria have been sought to replace or narrow down the above. As a result, pragmatics has often been defined, rather, *by extension*-- that is, by listing one by one its objects of study (speech acts, deixis, inference, modality, and so on).

3. Orientations and connections

What, then, is original about the pragmatic view that is not found in other, neighbouring views? Perhaps there is not any one thing in particular, but rather the sum of a series of traits and interests (cf. Payrató 2003): emphasis on the speakers or the *énonciation*, the links between text and context, the will to explain meaning (literal and non-literal) and its interpretation, the regulation of linguistic behaviour, the integration of complementary points of view on use, the need to explain functional variation in particular, and variation and diversity in general...

The precedents on one hand, and objectives on the other, have given different shades and nuances to the various orientations within pragmatics, from those most linked to sociolinguistics to those most grammatical (*sociopragmatics* at one extreme and *pragmalinguistics* at other, according to Leech 1983), and from the most general, concerned with pragmatics universals and the general requisites and conditions for language use, to the most specific, emphasising the description of particular aspects or resources of a given language or culture.

In fact, as most commentators would freely agree, it is no easy task to define where pragmatics ends and sociolinguistics begins (see for example Calsamiglia and Tusón 1991; and cf. manuals by Boix and Vila 1998 and Bassols 2001). At the same time there is nothing to be gained from subsuming all research on language use under a general heading which might seem to unify but which would end up being a ragbag category of miscellaneous items. The way forward seems rather to try to determine, as much from a diachronic as from a synchronic angle, the theoretical network of connections in which to situate each individual piece of research. Grosso modo, the prevailing orientations and approaches in pragmatics are, first of all, as in other sciences: the often inaptly named *theoretical* orientation, which comprises the baseline research and includes metapragmatics, the *descriptive* orientation

(which in turn necessarily includes a contrastive component and an historical component) and the *applied* orientation, aimed at solving practical problems arising out of language use.

The development of pragmatic *explanation*, as a general theory of use, would include providing satisfactory answers or findings on a series of issues including the question of pragmatic universals and the processes of grammaticalisation (basically, the nature of the relationship between pragmatics and grammar). Issues, these, which cannot be disassociated from research with more empiric or descriptive scope, on the impact of social and cultural factors in language use. This orientation has to permit theoretical speculation securely grounded on an empirical basis. Ideally it also has to facilitate applications of all sorts: in the field of language teaching, in the resolving of conflicts that commonly arise in everyday interaction, in interethnic or intercultural communication, in the diagnosis and treatment of language disabilities, and so forth.

4. New and old issues

The multiple *viewpoints* or *outlooks* which the object of analysis –that of language use-- affords us finally become different ways of *photographing* (or *filming*, for those who prefer a less static metaphor!) this object. Pragmatics has developed via theories which, in more or less faithful ways, have had their influence on the following focuses of interest (see Payrató 2003):

- a) *Rules and principles*: what controlling norms govern interlocutors' language use or *linguistic behaviour*?
- b) *The context*: how do utterances match or relate to contexts of use?
- c) *Meaning and inference*: how do we recognise and interpret the meaning of utterances?
- d) *Grammaticalisation*: where do pragmatics end and grammar begin, and what is the motivation behind processes of grammaticalisation?
- e) *Functionality*: how is language, as machinery or system, adapted to requirements made on it?

Out of these different focuses of interest, and the associated issues, have come theories that can throw light on a nucleus of problems which intuition tells us must be difficult to reduce to a single parameter. Traditional speech act theory –the theory of what we do when we speak– has been the motivating force behind most work in the pragmatics field, with distinctions drawn between various dimensions: the *locutionary aspect* (the act of saying), *illocutionary aspect* (what is done when we say something: affirmation, order, etc.), the *perlocutionary aspect* (what result is produced by what we say, the effect on the interlocutor-receiver). This has led to work, for example, on acts of *indirection*, in which the illocutionary force does not coincide with what we would expect from the message's literal content; for example, *You've left the light on*, meaning that the light should be turned off, and not meant as a simple statement of fact.

Work on such speak act theory has considerable momentum even today (see especially Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001 and Vanderveken and Kubo (eds.) 2001), although the study of inference, more concerned with overtones of meaning than with a general theory of human action, has come to be the prime area of research interest. Not without considerable discrepancy however: apart from theories on argumentation (see Anscombe and Ducrot 1983, Moeschler and Reboul 1994), two main orientations can be seen, represented by Levinson (1983, 2000), on the one hand, and Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), on the other. The latter scholars are the introducers and defenders of relevance theory. This holds relevance (or pertinence) to be what shapes and structures communicative and cognitive activity, underpinning the way in which we produce and understand linguistic utterances.

The importance of relevance or pertinence was already covered by H. P. Grice, not formulated as a principle, but rather as a lower-level factor, that of *conversational maxim*, along with *truth*, *quantity* and *manner*. As Grice saw it, these four taken together made up the principle of *conversational cooperation*, which establishes the fact of cooperation between interlocutors in the conversational enterprise. Other principles, referring to relationship, quantity, informativeness, communicability and politeness (or tact), have also made their appearance in the many and varied treatments of rule-governed language use (cf. Lakoff 1973, Leech 1983, Horn 1988, Mey 1993, Verschueren, Östman & Blommaert (eds.) 1995, Mey (ed.) 1998).

Context continues to be a point of contention in many senses, whether seen in cognitive terms, as in relevance theory, or in sociocultural and situational terms. There are probably few notions in pragmatics (and in linguistics) that are more diffuse and more controversial than this, present as it is in many theories, especially those which seek to explain the adaptability of language (see Verschueren 1987 and 1999). This capacity to adapt implies developing theories (or sub theories) that might allow us both to explain the functionality of language as a vehicle (as a universal feature) and the grammaticalisation of certain structures. The latter would represent, in terms of a syntactic core, what is the essence of pragmatics, the universal elements of a pragmatic nature that have become codified (for example the *I* and *you* of the interaction; see Mey (ed.) 1998).

It's unlikely that any single one of the current pragmatics theories will be able to fully explain or resolve the issues that have emerged both from long-standing areas of interest or from more recently explored ones. Research on deixis –as a link between system and the use, at personal, time, and space levels— and modality, understood in the broader sense of what the speaker states in the utterance, all need to be added to the above, and present multiple connections between grammatical aspects, since they constitute, in reality, the interface between system and use.

What is more, modality is akin to subjectivity (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980), and the latter in turn is akin to style: pragmastylistics is in fact (or stylistics *tout court*), an area of study which has always been present, more or less explicitly, with different slants, in pragmatics studies (see Hickey (ed.) 1989 and volume 29 of *Caplletra*, 2000). The nature of choice –albeit restricted by social norms— associated with language use, is what lies behind this continuing presence which has led in its turn to different (sub)theories, which need to cohere with explanations of functional variation.

Other more recent approaches connect grammar with sociocultural aspects: linguistic politeness, above all, has emerged as a centre of interest that has brought together and articulated a very large amount of research, particularly after publication of the study by Brown and Levinson (1987). Lastly, pragmatic connections have started to extend into the field of multimodality, that is to say the analysis of communicative phenomena performed – in synchronisation— across different channels. It has been several years since the issue was first raised or outlined (see especially Arndt and Janney 1987) and is one of the new challenges that pragmatics (as well as discourse analysis and sociolinguistics in general) will now have to come to terms with, now, at the turn of the new century. That is, how to coordinate analysis of processes of communication and interaction where verballity, vocality and gesture form three channels of simultaneous, synchronised production (see Payrató 2002).

5. Three examples and a proposal

The following examples, adapted from Payrató (2003), can serve, despite the obvious simplification, as examples of the different connections and orientations discussed above:

(1) ((In a restaurant, the waiter asks what two people wish to order for lunch))

- A: Have you chosen?
B: Beef.
C: Beef.
A: Beef, as well.

(2) ((At a bakery, a woman refers to the nougat she has at home, from the previous Christmas))

- A: It's like...
(.) (gesture symbolising 'smell', in front of her nose)
(.) ...rancid.

(3) ((Walking along the street in the same direction, a man addresses a woman, asking a question))

- A: Do you still live round here?
B: No.
(..) now we're in El Remei [district].

A: (moves his head backwards, raises his eyebrows, opening his eyes very wide and sticking out his tongue)

Example (1) show connections, seldom observed, between politeness, grammar, the construction of conversation turns and text cohesion: the waiter (interlocutor A), in the fourth turn "repairs", by adding a polite *as well*, the apparent "impolite" turn from interlocutor C, who fails to use any marker of cohesion linking with B's utterance. Courtesy would require this linkage since the same dish is mentioned a second time (the unmarked form here would be something like *me too, I'll have the same*, etc.).

Examples (2) and (3) exhibit multiple connections between verbal and non-verbal elements: in (2) a gesture (with the basic meaning of "bad smell") precedes the verbal information on the state of the nougat; in (3), the complex gesture of the interlocutor A denotes surprise, astonishment, but it is not accompanied by any verbal elements; nonetheless, the exchange would be impossible to analyse without this fragment, forming the whole, with the multiple non-verbal markers also showing who is asked the question, or how the exchange ends (greetings are also exclusively non verbal).

To close, the following list or grid (see also Payrató 2003 and the VARCOM project, Payrató, Alturo and Juanhuix 2003) represents an attempt to group, tentatively, different traits or markers which might appear in any fragment of speech. These markers, along with non-verbal elements which belong to another grid, help to form the discourse style of an individual, both from the perspective of production and reception of the message:

(4) Verbal-style and discourse-style markers:

(A) Of dialect: (1) historical (contemporary / earlier), (2) geographical (local / standard), (3) social: social class, educational level, generational, genre-related, acquisitional, social or ethnic group

(B) Of functional variety: (4) field (specialised / non-specialised), (5) Of mode: channel (oral / written / mixed) and of degree of preparation (unplanned / planned / mixed), (6) tenor: functional (interactive / informative / mixed), personal (subjective - involved / objective - distant), (7) tone (informal / neutral / formal)

(C) Of text type: (8) orientation (narrative / descriptive / explicative / argumentative / instructive), (9) materialisation: composition or nature (extension, nominal / verbal), organisation or structure (explicit / implicit, bound / unbound), unified or cohesive / not cohesive), interpretability or coherence (coherent / incoherent)

(D) Of genre or discourse type: (10) ambit (private, public or institutional), (11) purpose (non literary, literary or aesthetic), (12) structure (dialoguing or multi- managed / monologue)

The intertwining of categories and subcategories, with the consequent difficulties in categorisation, reflects the difficulties, common to pragmatics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, experienced in characterising individuals' speech in objective and measurable terms, above and beyond the subjective, anecdotal or impressionistic views. Progress in pragmatics has to represent an improvement in our capacity to understand the phenomena in question –that is, to describe them in the terms habitual in any science, to measure them, classify them and explain them objectively, and above all in terms of an ethology of the communication.

6. Confluences and perspectives

All that we have discussed to this point, especially the connection between the pragmatic and communicative dimensions which we have just noted, clearly derives from the fact that pragmatics, while ideally reducible to one specific theory, is more normally seen these days as a field consisting of confluences and perspectives from a range of different research on language use. This is all the more so, given that pragmatic lines of investigation have been increasingly applied, in their turn, to intersections with other disciplines and to applied linguistics. New approaches and renewal of vision have benefited first and second language teaching, the analysis of language contact, translation and literary studies, automatic language processing, and many more.

In short, the field of pragmatics, both in general and in specific terms –tied to a language, culture or language community-- can be viewed as a programme of research in the development stage, with various different roots (see, especially with reference to Catalan, Salvador 1984), which could finally settle on one orientation in particular, whether social, grammatical and textual, stylistic or cognitive (cf. Viana 1997, Cuenca 2002 and Payrató 2002*b*, volume 29 of *Caplletra* and Cuenca and Hilferty 1999).

To a large extent, a return to its beginnings is inevitable: pragmatics continues to develop a role which in many ways is similar to pure philosophical reflection and inquiry. And if it is true that there is no philosophy other than that which reflects on language, we will have to conclude that the philosophy of language and pragmatics share the same ends and proceed in parallel or converging fashion. That the contributions made by J. L. Austin, J. R. Searle and H. P. Grice were of value to pragmatics was not just a matter of chance. Nor were they alone in this (consider L. Wittgenstein, J. Habermas...). Furthermore, sociolinguistics has profited, over the course of its history, from many contributions from without, and in any case the borrowing or transfer of concepts from one discipline to another constitutes a particularly interesting chapter in the history of the science.

Bearing in mind that pragmatics research has steadily come to acquire *official standing* (institutionalisation or *officialisation*), along with a critical mass of researchers clearly in evidence, we can say that the whole future of this discipline will depend now on being able to unify (that is coordinate, rather than render uniform) the different trends and directions within the discipline, involving the different confluences mentioned above. This, whether we like it or not, cannot disassociate itself, at least in a *holistic* sense, from the neighbouring viewpoints of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and the philosophy of language. Of course, the same could be said of each of these other *viewpoints*... In any case it should be noted that the multiplicity of perspectives, not only will not trivialise the discipline, but should actually contribute to focussing the complexity and defining the *multidisciplinary nature* of those language sciences which concern themselves with language use.

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