

Pragmatics

Lecture 7

Outline

1. Definition and Scope of Pragmatics.
2. Aim of Pragmatic Studies.
3. Main Tasks of Pragmatics.
4. Major Approaches to Pragmatics.
5. Evolution of Pragmatic Studies.
6. Practical Value and Applications.

Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies how context influences meaning in communication.

Unlike semantics, which focuses on the literal meaning of words and sentences, pragmatics examines *how meaning is shaped* by the

- ✓ **speaker's intentions,**
- ✓ **hearer's interpretation,**
- ✓ and **situational context.**

Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics investigates “*how language users convey and interpret meaning depending on shared knowledge, goals, and situational parameters.*” (Verschueren, 2020)

- ✓ **Linguistic context:** prior discourse.
- ✓ **Physical context:** setting, participants, time, and place.
- ✓ **Social context:** relationships, power distance, cultural norms.
- ✓ **Cognitive context:** shared beliefs and intentions.

“You left the door open.”

- ✓ Literal: statement of fact.
- ✓ Pragmatic meaning: implicit request - *Please close it.*

Scope of Pragmatics

- ✓ **Deixis** (e.g., “here,” “now,” “you”) – words whose meaning depends on context.
- ✓ **Presupposition** – assumptions shared by speaker and listener.
- ✓ **Implicature** – implied meaning beyond what is explicitly stated.
- ✓ **Speech acts** – communicative actions performed via language (requesting, apologizing).
- ✓ **Conversational maxims** and **politeness strategies**.

NB!

Literal meaning: *It's cold in here.*

Pragmatic meaning: *The speaker is indirectly requesting to close the window.*

Aim of Pragmatic Studies

The **main aim** of pragmatics is to explain **how language users understand and produce communicative meaning** in context.

It explores:

- ✓ How interlocutors infer intended meanings.
- ✓ How context governs the interpretation of utterances.
- ✓ How language use reflects social and cultural norms.

Pragmatics thus bridges **linguistics, psychology, and sociolinguistics**, linking grammar and real-world communication.

Main Tasks of Pragmatics

- ✓ **Analyzing meaning in context:** Understanding how the same utterance changes meaning in different settings.
- ✓ **Modeling speaker-hearer interaction:** Explaining how participants cooperate to construct meaning.
- ✓ **Exploring implicatures and presuppositions:** Detecting what is *meant* rather than what is *said*.
- ✓ **Examining social and cultural variables:** Understanding politeness, power relations, and communicative norms.
- ✓ **Integrating pragmatic competence into language teaching and AI systems.**

Major Approaches to Pragmatics

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Core Focus</i>	<i>Key Theorists</i>	<i>Example</i>
Speech Act Theory	Language as action (locution, illocution, perlocution)	Austin (1962), Searle (1969)	<i>“I apologize”</i> = act of apologizing
Conversational Implicature	Meaning derived via inference beyond the literal	Grice (1975)	<i>“Some students passed”</i> → implies not all did
Politeness Theory	Strategies for maintaining social harmony	Brown & Levinson (1987)	<i>“Could you...?”</i> softens a request
Relevance Theory	Communication as inference guided by relevance	Sperber & Wilson (1986/2021)	Hearer interprets based on optimal relevance
Neo-Gricean & Cognitive Pragmatics	Updates integrating cognition and culture	Levinson (2000), Tomasello (2020)	Contextual cues in intercultural communication

Speech Act Theory

(Austin 1962; Searle 1969)

Language is viewed as action - to say something is to do something.

Example: *I now pronounce you husband and wife.* → performs the act.

Conversational Implicature (Grice 1975)

Communication follows the **Cooperative Principle** and four **maxims**:

- ✓ *Quantity*: be as informative as required.
- ✓ *Quality*: be truthful.
- ✓ *Relation*: be relevant.
- ✓ *Manner*: be clear.

Example: *How was the exam? – Let's just say the weather was nice.*
→ implicates failure.

Politeness Theory

(Brown & Levinson 1987)

Speakers use linguistic strategies to maintain **face** (public self-image).

Example:

Could you possibly...? (negative politeness);

Great work! (positive politeness).

Relevance Theory

(Sperber & Wilson 1986/2021)

Communication is an inferential process guided by cognitive expectations of relevance.

Example:

There's a bank around the corner. - interpreted as relevant to the hearer's goal (finding an ATM).

Cognitive and Socio-Pragmatic Approaches (2000–present)

Integrate cognition, culture, and interactional dynamics.

Example:

Interpreting irony, humor, and multimodal cues in digital communication.

Evolution of Pragmatic Study

- ✓ **Classical Foundations (1950s–1970s)** – Speech act theory and Grice's cooperative principle established pragmatics as a distinct field.
- ✓ **Expansion (1980s–1990s)** – Focus on politeness, discourse, and cultural pragmatics.
- ✓ **Cognitive & Socio-Pragmatic Integration (2000s–2010s)** – Incorporation of cognitive science and cultural studies.
- ✓ **Applied & Computational Pragmatics (2010s–present)** – Use in language teaching, AI communication models, and intercultural contexts.

Evolution of Pragmatic Study

<i>Period</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Key Scholars / Concepts</i>
1950s–1970s	Foundations: Speech Acts, Cooperative Principle	Austin, Searle, Grice
1980s–1990s	Politeness, Cross-cultural Pragmatics	Brown & Levinson, Leech
2000s–2010s	Cognitive and Interactional Pragmatics	Mey, Tomasello, Levinson
2020s–present	Applied & Computational Pragmatics	Taguchi, Clark, Huang, AI NLP systems

Practical Value and Applications

1. Linguistics & Language Teaching

- ✓ Improves communicative competence in ESL/EFL learners.
- ✓ Develops awareness of indirectness, politeness, and turn-taking.

Example: “*Maybe you should open the window*” = indirect request.

Practical Value and Applications

2. Intercultural Communication

✓ Helps avoid misunderstandings across cultures.

Example: Directness in English vs. implicitness in Japanese communication.

Practical Value and Applications

3. Artificial Intelligence and NLP

- ✓ Enables chatbots to interpret user intent in a contextual manner.

Practical Value and Applications

4. Clinical and Psychological Use

- ✓ Diagnosing pragmatic language impairments (e.g., autism spectrum).

Practical Value and Applications

Context	Utterance	Pragmatic Meaning
Restaurant	<i>This soup is cold.</i>	Complaint/request for reheating
Office	<i>We could use more coffee.</i>	Suggestion to make coffee
Classroom	<i>It's noisy here, isn't it?</i>	Implicit request for silence
Online chat	<i>Okay...</i>	Possible disapproval or irritation depending on tone

Pragmatics and Related Disciplines

- ✓ **Semantics:** literal meaning.
- ✓ **Pragmatics:** intended meaning.
- ✓ **Sociolinguistics:** social variation in meaning.
- ✓ **Cognitive Linguistics:** mental models shaping meaning.
- ✓ **Discourse Analysis:** extended units of meaning across turns.

Current Research Directions (2020–2025)

- ✓ **Cross-cultural pragmatics:** examining global Englishes and intercultural politeness norms.
- ✓ **Digital pragmatics:** emojis, memes, and multimodal meaning online.
- ✓ **Experimental pragmatics:** psycholinguistic testing of inference processes.
- ✓ **Computational pragmatics:** AI interpretation of implicature and sarcasm.
- ✓ **Neuro-pragmatics:** brain mechanisms behind pragmatic competence (fMRI studies).

Highly Recommended:

- ✓ Taguchi (2021) – pragmatic development in L2 learners.
- ✓ Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs (2020) – collaborative reference in conversation.
- ✓ Huang et al. (2022) – computational modeling of conversational implicature.

References

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