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PRAGMATICS

What is Pragmatics

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 we understand more than just the linguistic content of utterances. From the perspective of pragmatics, more is always being communicated than is said. There are lots of illustrations of this pragmatic principle. Driving by a parking garage, you may see a large sign like the one in the picture (Figure 10.1). 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. (Maybe they will be more cheerful.) 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. We can illustrate a similar

process with our second example (Figure 10.2), taken from a newspaper advertisement. If we only think about the meaning of the phrase as a combination of the meanings of the words, using Furniture Sale as an analogy, we might arrive at an interpretation in which someone is announcing the sale of some very young children. Of course, we resist this possible interpretation and recognize instead that it is advertising a sale of clothes for those young children. The word clothes doesn't appear in the message, but we can bring that idea to our interpretation of the message as we work out what the advertiser intended us to understand. We are actively involved in creating an interpretation of what we read and hear.

Deixis

There are some very common words in our language that can't be interpreted at all if we don't know the context. These are words such as here and there, this or that, now or 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 local context for their interpretation (i.e. that the delivery driver will have to return on February 15th to 660 College Drive with the long box labeled "flowers, handle with care" addressed to Lisa Landry). Expressions such as tomorrow and here are technically known as deictic (/daɪktɪk/) expressions, from the Greek word deixis, which means "pointing" via language. We use deixis to point to people (him, them, those things), places (here, there, after

this) and times (now, then, next week). Person deixis: me, you, him, her, us, them, that woman, those idiots Spatial deixis: here, there, beside you, near that, above your head Temporal deixis: now, then, last week, later, tomorrow, yesterday 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 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 (go) or toward the speaker (come). Just think about telling someone to Go to bed versus Come to bed. Deixis can even be entertaining. The bar owner who puts up a big sign that reads Free Beer Tomorrow (to get you to return to the bar) can always claim that you are just one day too early for the free drink.

Deictic expressions represent a key connection between the time frame, space, and people involved. The word deictic has its roots in the Greek word “deiknynai”, meaning “to show”. A related word, “deixis”, is used in pragmatics and linguistics and it refers to a process whereby either words or expressions are seen to rely utterly on context. Levinson (1983) accentuates the role of the context; he argues that deixis is the reflection of the relationship between language and context and defines deixis as follows:

Deixis is an important field studied in pragmatics, semantics and linguistics. Deixis refers to the phenomenon wherein understanding the meaning of certain words and phrases in an utterance requires contextual information. Words or phrases that require contextual information to convey meaning are deictic. (Levinson, 1983:54)

The contextual information of the utterance mentioned by Levinson (1983) consists of information about the speaker, the addressee, the time and the place. For example, if we take a close look on the sentence *I am leaving tomorrow*, who does *I*, *am*, and *tomorrow* refer to? We cannot identify the meaning of this utterance, unless we know the time of the utterance, the place, and who the speaker is, in other words the context of the utterance. Expressions like *I*, *you*, *we*, *this*, *that*, *here*, *there*, *today*, *tomorrow*, are all indexed, and the listener needs to identify the speaker, the time and the place of the utterance to fully understand what is being said and meant. There are three deictic categories identified in the literature. These are: **personal deixis** (*I*, *you*, *we*), **spatial deixis** (*this*, *that*, *here*, *there*), and **temporal deixis** (*now*, *today*, *yesterday*). In addition to person, place and time deixis, Levinson (1983), following Lyons (1977) and Filmore (1977), adds two other deictic categories. These are: **social deixis** which covers the encoding of social distinctions that are relative to participant-roles, particularly aspects of the social relationship holding between speaker and addressee(s) or speaker and some referents, and **discourse deixis** which involves the encoding of reference to portions of the unfolding discourse in which the utterance is located.

As opposed to Levinson, Yule (1996:9) describes deixis as a way of “pointing through language”, and also refers to deixis as a technical word that comes from Greek. Yule (1996) also admits that deictic expressions have their most basic uses in face-to-face spoken utterances. In addition, Lyons (1977:377) has defined deixis as follows:

By deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatio-temporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance

and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and a least one addressee (Lyons 1997:377).

In other words, an utterance containing deictic expressions such as *I will move this chair over here* requires contextual information for an accurate meaning: which chair is being referred to, knowledge about space – knowing where here is, and who the speaker is. Levinson (1983) states that an utterance can be tested as being deictic or not in terms of its truth conditions. For example, if we say *George is the husband of Maria*, the utterance can be either true or false, however if we say *He is the husband of Maria*, we cannot assess whether the sentence is true or false because it depends who the *he* is. If we take another example, such as *I'll come and see you tomorrow*, we cannot assess whether this sentence is true or false because we are not aware of when the sentence was written, therefore we do not know when *tomorrow* is. Thus, knowledge about the context in the interpretation of utterances containing deictic expressions is crucial.

For Levinson (1983:64), deixis is organised in an egocentric way, with the deictic centre constituting the reference point in relation to which a deictic expression is to be interpreted. For example, in an utterance such as *I'm over here now*, the speaker, the actual location and the actual time of the utterance are respectively the deictic centres. The term deictic centre underlines that the deictic term has to relate to the situation exactly at the point where the utterance is made or the text is written, in other words it has to relate to the position from which the deictic terms are understood. In conversations, the deictic centre is constantly changing between the partners; the speech event is conceptualised from a different point of view.

A deictic expression is a word or phrase that points out the different meaning the words have in various situations. Without a pragmatic approach, the interpretation of an utterance would be impossible to understand, therefore deictic expressions are crucial and it involves the relationship between the structure of languages and the contexts in which they are used. A word that depends on deictic indicators is called a **deictic word** , and is bound to a context. Hence, words that are deictic hold a denotational meaning which varies depending on time and/or place, and a fixed semantic meaning (Levinson, 1983).

In addition to knowing the time, place and the speaker and addressee, deictic expressions help us realise what is close to the speaker and what is not. This is defined by the following two terms: **proximal** (near the speaker), such as *this, here, now* , and **distal** (away from the speaker) such as *that, there, then* (Levinson, 1983). This concept of distance is more relevant to the study of spatial deixis. Deictic expressions also help us realise if the movement is away from the speaker or towards the speaker (*go vs come*). According to Fillmore (1977), the most obvious manifestations of deictic categories in languages are to be found in the systems of pronouns i.e *I, we, she* , demonstratives i.e *this, these* ; and tenses i.e *walk, walked* .

Person deixis localises an entity in relation to the position of the speaker and/or hearer (Green, 2008). First and second person pronouns typically refer to the speaking and hearing speech participants, whereas third person pronouns designate the non-speech or narrated participant. According to Lyons (1983) the active participants are the speaker and the addressee, whereas the third person is not an active participant in the speech act.

To give an illustration of what I mean let us look at the following examples:

1) *I* was late.

2) *You* arrived early.

3) *I* saw *them* .

Third person pronouns may be used deictically or anaphorically. An anaphoric use of a deictic expression occurs when reference is being made to another entity that was introduced earlier in the text/speech.

Examples:

4) John believes *she* is beautiful. (deictic use)

5) John thinks I heard *him* . (anaphoric use)

In English, pronouns come in singular and plural forms, several are marked for case, and the third person singular forms encode gender.