Pragmatics as a Part of Semantics

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Abstract

Pragmatics is evolving beyond its initial status as a subset of semantics, deserving greater attention in the language classroom. Semantic rules of sentence construction may provide an incomplete picture of intended meaning. First, some definitions as outlined in the literature will be considered. Then concepts that are relative to these definitions will be explored. Meaning in the semantic sense differs from pragmatic meaning, yet provides some common ground between the two terms. Meaning will differ, however, due to context. Deictic expressions, often with pronouns, highlight some of the overlap between pragmatics and semantics. Truth value assists in comparing semantics with pragmatics, though writers differ on the extent to which it can be applied.

As a linguistic study, pragmatics has evolved from what was first called the 'wastebasket', in that items which didn't fit neatly into the current understanding of the way language operated were just considered a kind of refuse to be discarded. Meaning was thought to be defined primarily by semantics, and pragmatic meaning, when it was categorized in some location other than the wastebasket, was merely a subset of semanticism. While the rules of grammar provide us with guidelines on how words are used to form sentences, instructors and learners might benefit from an increased awareness of how pragmatics and semantics affect language communication.

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What are we talking about in regard to pragmatics and why is it important to language usage? Consider an example utterance, perhaps made in an office building:

A: *She got it last week.*

We may analyse this semantically and decide that we are talking about a woman, who is in possession of a thing and it happened one week ago.   But we cannot be sure of the speaker's intended meaning from this level of analysis alone.   The following utterance might change our assumption.   Speaker B might respond with:

B1:   *But she didn't deserve it!   Managers can be so unfair!*
        or another response would lead us to a different assumption:
B2:   *She should've gone to the hospital earlier.*
        or another:
B3:   *TNT courier is very reliable.*

Each of these responses from B suggests that three different conversations could result from the statement A, where A by itself does not convey enough meaning for us to understand the utterance. In the above examples, we are assuming the speakers are native to the language.   If we add the dimension of cross-cultural communication, it is not hard to imagine that if the exchange above consisted of first Speaker A, then B1, we might expect a third participant, C, for whom English is an L2, to ask B1 the following question:

C: *Did the boss give something to her?*

Speaker C, in making a semantic analysis of the exchange between A and B1, might not understand the exchange at all. In asking the above question, it would suggest that C did have some degree of pragmatic knowledge in guessing that a woman 'received' something from the manager. However, full understanding could still be lacking where C might imagine that an inappropriate gift was the topic, when in fact it was an employee's scolding. This would be understandable since not having the benefit of a lifetime of using a language makes it more difficult

to grasp meanings that are in the abstract rather than the concrete. The person referred to in 'she' of course did not receive a physical object, but rather a reprimand. So understanding the difference in these two kinds of meaning analyses is especially important for users of the language and foreign language learners in particular.

Definitions

One way to begin an analysis is by defining what is meant by the terms pragmatics and semantics. The man credited with establishing pragmatics as a concept, de Saussure (1915/1966), used terms from his native French to distinguish the idea of 'langue' (language) from 'parole' (language use). Since then, some of the discussions have been identified as a contrast between semantics and pragmatics, where 'meaning' forms a common denominator between the two.

As a starting point, we can consider Yule (1996, p. 4): "Semantics is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world." This nicely connects the idea that words have reference to things around us. Then regarding pragmatics: "...(it) is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms" (Yule, 1996, p. 4). As a point of distinction between the two fields, the key word in this definition is "users." Many linguists agree that the idea of people as users of a language and how they relate to different language forms is what assists in distinguishing pragmatics from semantics.

So in its simplest form, a definition of pragmatics must include the idea of speaker meaning, as opposed to semantics being a consideration of the meaning in words and expressions. But some other concepts make this distinction oversimplistic. Pragmatics usually relates the idea of speaker context, which will often be influenced by the speaker's position in space and time. The user of the language assumes more prominence and in particular, it is the situation of the speakers and hearers which becomes essential. For simplicity in this discussion, we can consider speakers (S) to be equivalent to writers and hearers (H) equivalent to readers.

Another approach by Leech (1983) suggests that the discussion should be characterized as one of grammar, or more specifically, trans- formational grammar, compared to pragmatics. After considering the extent to which one domain is a subset of the other, he proposes that within linguistics the two are complementary. That is not to say that they function in the same way, where he maintains that semantics (as part of the grammar) is determined by rules, while pragmatics is determined by principles.

The Idea of Meaning

Having decided that the concept of meaning is the 'common ground', it should be considered further. Semantic meaning, following Leech's suggestion, is the meaning provided by the abstract rule- governed system of grammar, while pragmatic meaning is determined by the use, which in addition will be determined by context (to be discussed below). So the idea of meaning as it relates to the knowledge of a language system, versus meaning derived from language in use, suggests that we could consider the nature of meaning along the lines of competence and performance.

This doesn't conflict with Searle (1991, p. 258), who suggests another approach when describing speech acts and suggests the idea that the sounds of an utterance "have meaning" as well as the speaker intending to "mean something" by those sounds.

Returning to Leech, meaning in semantics is determined by language expressions independent of the context, the speakers or the hearers, while meaning in pragmatics must be determined with respect to both S and H. So he suggests that the semantic question is: "What does X mean?" while in pragmatics: "What did you mean by X?" (Leech, 1983, p. 6)

Similarly, Grundy (1995, p. 180) quotes Chomsky: "We must distinguish between the literal meaning of the linguistic expression produced by S and what S meant by producing this expression.........I can just as well ask, in the same sense of 'meaning', what S meant by slamming the door."

Consider This Utterance: *"Are you sure about this?"*

We can consider the semantic meaning for each word ('Are' means........; 'you' means.........; etc.) and with our knowledge of syntax decide that S is questioning the certainty of H about an item identified by 'this'. But with more information about S and H, their relationship to each other, the intonation used by S, the nature of 'this', etc., we can understand meaning on a different level. It may be that S intends to show disagreement, or intends to suggest that H has not properly considered a decision about a topic identified as 'this'. In the latter case then, we will be answering the question 'What does S mean by the above sentence?' Sentence meaning in a holistic sense may differ from the simple sum of meanings derived from each word.

In support of his approach, Leech comments that language meaning cannot be studied from the pragmatics side only, or the semantics side only, and still maintain what he suggests is the proper account of meaning in language, which is that it should be factual and it should tend to be simple and general. He maintains his view of 'complementarism' where there is an interrelationship between the two. In so doing he rejects Searle's position that language meaning is based on speech acts, and therefore dominated by pragmatics. Likewise, the concept of a Performative Hypothesis, where pragmatic meaning could be considered through the semantic meaning of performative sentences, is also rejected by Leech.

Along similar lines, Grundy (1995) discusses pragmatic meaning and 'conventional meaning' but he differs when he suggests that this is 'inadequate'. He suggests that it is not sufficient in explaining some of the generalized conversational expressions which we use without relation to context, and which lack conventional meaning.

Considering Context

If pragmatic meaning differs from semantic meaning on the basis of context, then what constitutes context? Leech (1983, p. 13) states that it is "any background knowledge assumed to be shared by S and H and which contributes to H's interpretation of what S means by a given

utterance." In this simple definition, Leech excludes the intention of S and deals with that and the concept of the statement as a speech act separately. In the example above, background knowledge might include the roles of S and H, such as mother and daughter and the 'power' relationship which that creates; it could be that 'this' refers to a life-changing decision that the daughter is making, like choosing a university or a husband. S may intend to show disapproval or to show that H needs to reconsider. So the full pragmatic meaning must be recognized by H as either S's disapproval or suggestion to reconsider, and that ability to recognize the 'underlying' meaning in the expression will also be part of the background knowledge, similar to the same way that English speakers recognize 'Hello' as a greeting, in the semantic sense.

Another way to consider context that is perhaps more descriptive of the way that it functions in meaning is 'shared assumptions'. Meaning is dependent on shared assumptions not only in the case of pragmatic meaning, but also semantic meaning.

For teachers of a foreign language, cross-cultural differences are quite relevant and yet they haven't been considered to a great extent in the discussions, as Lyons (1995) points out in relation to Grice's maxims of conversation (Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner). Related to these maxims he notes the lack of consideration for socio-cultural bias in their application to context. The idea of what is 'brief', 'informative', etc. in one language will vary according to cultural norms. In directly translating a sentence from their L1, students will also likely apply their understanding of L1 context to that of the second language context.

Finally, to suggest a more formal definition of context, Lyons suggests considering context on the basis of propositions. Lyons (1995, p. 41) states "context is taken to be a set of propositions in relation to which new propositions can be evaluated for truth and added to the context (or rejected as untrue)." This seems more abstract, but it has the value of reflecting that context will be dynamic and requires constant re-evaluation, while semantic properties tend to be more static.

It seems clear that understanding depends on S and H sharing the same context, and shared assumptions are part of this. Yule (1996) states that the more they share in the way of context, the less language they'll need when referring to common things.

Deixis Provides Common Ground

Semantics and pragmatics tend to overlap in the area of deixis, where certain forms 'point' us to the meaning in a sentence. For example, pronouns may be recognized for their semantic meaning in a sentence yet they also function in the pragmatic sense. In 'He gave it to her' for example, we have no knowledge as to who 'He' and 'her' refer to, or what 'it' refers to either. We may consider semantically that 'He' must mean [+animate] [+human] [+male] but hearer, H, first needs the contextual meaning, and then the semantic meaning can be applied to make sense of S. Among the different types of pronouns, deixis tends to apply most often to the personal pronouns, such as 'he' and 'her' above, and demonstrative pronouns like 'this' and 'that'. With so many sentences used in English being deictic, it seems critical to understanding the role of deixis in pragmatics and semantics.

In another example, consider 'This goes over there.' Again we can analyze the semantical meaning of each of the individual forms but still not understand what is being communicated. The proximal term 'this' (being near the speaker) and the distal term 'over there' (being away from the speaker) must be taken in relation to the speaker's location for the hearer to understand the intended meaning.

Lyons (1995) emphasizes that deictic context as suggested by the types of pronouns mentioned above, time expressions such as 'yesterday' or verbs such as 'come', 'bring' may be commonly recognized, but that deixis may be implicitly present in other ways, such as "It is raining". The intended meaning is to inform that it is raining in the place and at the time that S makes the utterance, even though these ideas are not explicitly stated. So even without these forms, there remains an underlying meaning in the statement of S not defined by semantical analysis of that statement. While Lyons' assertion seems to be true in the example given, it seems difficult to accept that the absence of something in an utterance is proof that a process is at work.

Truth Value

Leech (1983) supports using the Cooperative Principle, as outlined by Grice in his maxims of conversation. One part of that principle falling under the maxim of Quality is 'truth value' and it has been debated somewhat, in connection with pragmatics. It sounds appealing to implore that everyone using language should be truthful, though it suggests a moral approach that must be very subjective in nature. Deciding what is truthful will vary greatly with the individual. Some statements are obviously not truthful such as 'The sun is green.' But people do tell lies and it does not mean that they are not using the language correctly. A common type of example sentence to demonstrate pragmatics is something like: 'You left the door open.' If instead the speaker said: 'Gee I'm so cold' as a means of communicating a request to close the door, the intended meaning of S (a request to close the door) is the same, whether S truly feels cold or not. Whichever sentence S chooses, there will be an implied request to close the door, otherwise known as conversational implicature.

Semantics is perhaps more dependent on truth value in the propositions of sentences. The semantic property of the words must be understood correctly in the above example. If the sentence had been: 'Gee, I'm so smart' it wouldn't function as a request to close the door because 'smart' does not have the semantic property of temperature. Semantically, only some words indicating that S feels cold will make H understand that the door should be closed.

If we consider the use of metaphor and truth value, do we maintain the maxim of Quality? For example, in the above case, if the sentence was 'This room is a refrigerator' both S and H would realize that this was not a truthful statement (i.e. a room cannot be a kitchen appliance) and that it was meant to describe the speaker's feeling about being cold. Lyons (1995, p. 284) makes the point that where some linguistists use 'truth conditionality' in separating semantics from pragmatics, and place metaphorical statements into pragmatics, they "tend to miss this point." In the case of these two sentences, there is no difference in the illocutionary force (the effect of the speech act) between the first statement and 'This room is cold.'

Summary

From this discussion, we have considered 'meaning' as it forms the backdrop for understanding the relationship between pragmatics and semantics. While both disciplines are concerned with meaning, pragmatics is concerned with meaning in the use of language in particular. One means of deriving meaning is through context and it was noted that background information or even shared assumptions can create context. Context by its nature is dynamic. Deixis is widespread in the effect it has on both semantic and pragmatic meaning, and the way in which these two functions together leads Leech to suggest that this relationship is complementarism. Lyons suggests that the absence of some forms in a statement that appears to lack underlying meaning may actually be interpreted pragmatically. Truth value seems to be more critical to semantic meaning than pragmatic. The interrelationship of these factors make separating these two disciplines somewhat complicated.

One more definition of pragmatics might provide a good final summary. Yule (1996, p. 3) suggests four areas specifically be included: "Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning...of contextual meaning...of how more gets communicated than is said...of the expression of relative distance." While it does help us to focus on speaker meaning through the semantical meaning of the words chosen by the speaker, the way in which the speaker uses those forms to create an underlying meaning, not apparent at the semantic level, is the domain of pragmatics.

Finally, what might be the value in demarcating these two areas of linguistic study? To understand both speaker meaning and the context in which words are used means going beyond the grammatical structures that link words together. This means providing students with words, sentences and paragraphs as language texts--cohesive stories, articles or other passages that fully demonstrate the meaning of a writer or speaker by showing the situations in which the language is being used--something that the semantic study of disconnected sentences can rarely accomplish. Understanding the importance of pragmatic meaning and using textual materials that demonstrate its application to language communication should ultimately create more successful language learners.

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