

THIRD EDITION

DOING PRAGMATICS

PETER GRUNDY



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Praise for the previous edition:

'...a remarkably comprehensive book and a valuable resource for beginners in the study of pragmatics.'

Language

'...a fresh, strongly pedagogically orientated textbook which provides a step by step tour of the main topics of concern to pragmaticists alongside a detailed and carefully designed working plan for beginning students.'

Pragmatics and Cognition

Doing Pragmatics remains popular through its unparalleled capacity to render pragmatics truly accessible to students. Embracing the comprehensive and engaging style which characterized the previous editions, the third edition is fully revised and expanded.

Grundy consolidates the strengths of the original book, reinforcing its unique combination of theory and practice with new theory, exercises and up-to-date, real-world data and fascinating examples which are insightfully analysed. New chapters include pragmatic inference and language evolution, and intercultural pragmatics. Each chapter opens with an introductory section followed by a discussion of theory and an analysis of examples of naturally occurring data, and concludes with a section exploring problematic issues. Checking understanding boxes appear throughout the chapters allowing students to monitor their progress as they work through the book. All chapters conclude with activities designed to raise pragmatic awareness, suggestions for further reading and, new to this edition, discussion topics and essay titles.

Doing Pragmatics is designed for pragmatics courses both at an introductory and a more advanced level. It extends beyond theory to promote an applied understanding of empirical data and to provide students with the opportunity to 'do' pragmatics themselves, providing the ideal foundation for all those studying language, linguistics and ELT.

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Cover illustration: 'Eleanor Grundy' by Stephen Shankland

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
www.routledge.com

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ISBN 978-1-138-43754-8



9 781138 437548



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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1995 by Hodder Education
Second edition published in 2000
This third edition published in 2008
By Hodder Education

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

First issued in hardback 2017

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 13: 978-0-340-97160-4 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-43754-8 (hbk)

Typeset in 8.5pt Stone Serif by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

DOING PRAGMATICS

Preface (and how to get the best out of this book)

Some students find that learning pragmatics and learning syntax are mirror images of one another. Because pragmatic data consist of everyday utterances, the first impression of pragmatics tends to be that it's really quite easy: the examples and the ways they are described seem to accord closely with our intuitions about everyday talk. In contrast, when we study syntax for the first time, the formal representation of the examples often seems very challenging. But as time goes on, we realize that the underlying ideas in pragmatics are really very difficult indeed, whereas the underlying ideas in syntax have a simplicity and elegance that make syntax seem less difficult the more we study it. My main motive in writing this book has been to try and extend the sense felt in the early stages of pragmatics, that it's really a very accessible area of linguistics, to the second stage when we have to grapple with the more challenging underlying ideas.

There are now several very good pragmatics textbooks available: for this reason I've recommended chapters from several of them in the suggestions for further reading which appear at the end of each chapter. If this book is different, I hope it's because you'll feel that it's a genuine entry-level book with a wide coverage and with a suitable degree of challenge too. I also hope it justifies its title, *Doing Pragmatics*, which is meant to reflect its strong pedagogic orientation. Wherever possible, I've tried to use real examples of talk that I've collected over the years rather than rely on invented examples. A book about the use of language ought to work with 'live' examples.

The materials in this book have been extensively trialled over several generations of students. I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to teach pragmatics at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for many years and to have benefited from large and extremely lively lecture and seminar groups where I've frequently been caught out and corrected by clever students. And I have to admit that reading pragmatics essays and projects is often a learning experience too – students frequently have insights and react to data in ways that I've found enlightening and shaming.

As well as all the faults that are owed to me, in this book you'll also find many insights that are owed to generations of students. In particular, I've acknowledged some by name in the text of the book: Laurence Brushi, Andrew Caink, Roger Maylor, Csilla Szabo, and especially Kelly Glover, who contributed ideas to and read and commented insightfully on parts of the manuscript of the first edition all those years ago, thereby saving me from a number of mistakes. I also owe a considerable debt to Joanne Burdon, Charlotte Harper, Zhang Lin and Susan Millington, who've generously allowed me to use data which they collected and analysed in particularly insightful ways. Several of my former

colleagues in Hong Kong have also helped, both practically with data collection as well as with their insights, especially Annie Au, Phil Benson, Philip Bolt, Winnie Cheng, Hiroko Itakura, Yan Jiang and Martin Warren. But because this is pragmatics, I'm sure that as you read this book you'll see things that I've missed and even got wrong – please write and let me know when this happens.

In fact, one of the real pleasures I've enjoyed since the first edition came out in 1995 has been receiving so many thought-provoking comments from readers and users. I've tried to act on all the helpful suggestions I've received for this edition and gratefully acknowledge them here.

I also owe a great deal to the readers who commented anonymously on the proposals for this and previous editions. I appreciate the real trouble they took. The further refinements and new materials in this edition owe much to their helpful and generous work.

Although I never had a colleague at Durham who was first and foremost a pragmaticist, I was fortunate enough to work alongside stimulating colleagues in a department that took its linguistics seriously and in which all our different interests and approaches were understood to be independent and yet to have the same ultimate goal. As with deixis, the point of origin has been important to this book. All the more pity that in a moment of utter foolishness the powers-that-were decided to close the once outstanding Linguistics Department at Durham, a decision which so many linguists around the world have deplored.

I also owe a debt to my editors at Hodder Education, Lesley Riddle, who threw caution to the winds in allowing me to write this book in the first place, and Naomi Meredith, who bore with me when the first edition took longer than it should have done. Naomi also suggested the title, which is much better than those I'd toyed with and which has often been praised by other pragmaticists. Christina Wipf-Perry, the second edition editor, shamed me into trying to match her constant efficiency and at the same time gave me real confidence. For the third edition I've been fortunate to have Tamsin Smith and Bianca Knights to guide me and tidy up ever so many loose ends. Their kindness and attention to detail have been inspirational. I've also been very fortunate in having had Susan Dunsmore as copy editor for both the second edition and for this edition. No one could have made a better job of turning a less than tidy manuscript into the beautiful book you hold in your hand.

How to get the best out of this book

As you work your way through *Doing Pragmatics*, you'll notice that there's a movement from the study of short utterances in the early chapters to the study of more extended conversations in the later chapters. It's not only the data type that change, but the approach to pragmatics too. In the early chapters, you'll learn about the central areas of linguistic pragmatics. You can then use this knowledge in the later chapters as you develop the ability to handle larger pieces of data in a more 'empirical' way. Towards the end of the book, you'll find yourself progressively invited to take a stance in the various debates about approaches to pragmatics. You'll also notice that examples which we work with

in the earlier chapters sometimes turn up again in the later chapters. This gives you a sense of familiarity as you meet old friends again, but also shows that more than one way of accounting for a single example is often appropriate. As you'll see, things aren't always as simple as they appear at first sight.

Most of the chapters have a common structure, beginning with a simple example which is repeated in each chapter and evaluated from a chapter-specific perspective. This is then followed by a description of the essential principles of the area under consideration, which sets the scene for an examination of real-world uses. I hope this structure will soon become familiar and help you to navigate your way successfully not only through the book but also through each of the areas of pragmatics.

Another motive in writing this book has been the hope that it may help you to do your own pragmatics. There are four ways in which this book overtly addresses this motive:

As you read this book, you'll encounter *Checking Understanding* exercises at regular intervals. It's important that you attempt these exercises. Not only will they help you to confirm your understanding of what you're reading, but the Key containing suggested answers often includes ideas which supplement those in the main text of the book.

Second, at the end of every chapter there are a number of *Raising Pragmatic Awareness* activities which you can try for yourself, or with friends, or in a tutorial group. These are sensitizing activities which involve you in tasks like eavesdropping on conversations and reporting your findings to your colleagues or writing entries for a dictionary of pragmatics. Each of these activities is meant to be do-able either as a task set by your lecturer or on a self-study basis.

Third, as well as *Raising Pragmatic Awareness*, at the end of each chapter you'll also find several topics which can be used to stimulate tutorial discussion (or, if you must, essays).

Finally, Chapter 12 contains several suggestions for possible types of *Project Work*, and in particular gives advice on data collection and transcription techniques. It also contains a case-study which shows how conversational data can be collected and analysed in the light of pragmatic theory. I hope this chapter will help you in planning and carrying out your own project work.

I've tried to make this book a good read – so sit back and enjoy yourself.

Peter Grundy
March 2008

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 Using and understanding language	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Properties of everyday language	4
1.3 Deixis, speech acts, implicature	18
2 Deixis – the relation of reference to the point of origin of the utterance	22
2.1 Introduction	22
2.2 Deictic reference	23
2.3 Deixis in the real world	35
2.4 Indexicality, grammar and meaning	41
3 Presupposition – accommodating background knowledge	48
3.1 Introduction	48
3.2 Presuppositions as shared assumptions	49
3.3 Presupposition in the real world	56
3.4 Presuppositions as pragmatically conditioned assumptions	63
4 Speech acts – language as action	71
4.1 Introduction	71
4.2 Speech acts	72
4.3 Speech acts in the real world	81
4.4 Use, usage and idiom	87
5 Implicit meaning	92
5.1 Introduction	92
5.2 Grice's theory of conversational implicature	93
5.3 Neo-Gricean theories of implicature	109
5.4 Implicature in the real world	120
5.5 Implicature and conventionalization	125
6 Relevance theory	133
6.1 Introduction	133
6.2 Determining relevance	134
6.3 Relevance in the real world	146
6.4 Context and cognition	150
7 Metapragmatic awareness	155
7.1 Introduction	155
7.2 Metapragmatic and metasequential phenomena	156

	7.3 Metapragmatic marking in the real world	163
	7.4 Intonation and metalinguistic awareness	174
8	Pragmatic inference and language evolution	178
	8.1 Introduction	178
	8.2 Pragmatic meaning	179
	8.3 Pragmatic meaning and language evolution	180
9	Politeness phenomena	186
	9.1 Introduction	186
	9.2 Politeness phenomena and Brown and Levinson's theory	187
	9.3 Politeness phenomena in the real world	203
	9.4 The universal character of politeness	206
10	Empirical pragmatics, interactive pragmatics, talk-in-interaction	211
	10.1 Introduction	211
	10.2 Decontextualized pragmatics	212
	10.3 Personal context in the real world	214
	10.4 Talk-in-interaction	217
	10.5 Approaches to pragmatics	224
11	Intercultural pragmatics	228
	11.1 Introduction	228
	11.2 Issues in intercultural communication	229
	11.3 Intercultural pragmatics in the real world	239
	11.4 Lingua franca pragmatics	243
12	Doing project work in pragmatics	249
	12.1 The nature of pragmatic investigation	249
	12.2 Collecting data	251
	12.3 Transcription conventions	254
	12.4 Investigable topics	260
	12.5 Learning by doing	262
	<i>Afterword</i>	270
	<i>Checking understanding suggestions</i>	271
	<i>Glossary</i>	298
	<i>References</i>	303
	<i>Index</i>	310

1

Using and understanding language

We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.
(Sam Johnson, in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, 11 April 1776)

Keywords:

accommodation, appropriateness, context, deixis, implicature, indeterminacy, indirect meaning, inference, reflexivity, relevance, speech act

1.1 Introduction

In this first chapter, I'm going to write about some of the aspects of language use that are of particular interest to pragmaticists like you and me. At several points in the chapter, I'll make suggestions about the essential concerns of pragmaticists which will help you to define pragmatics.

Let's begin with a scenario. Walking at a brisk pace along the footpath, I pass a mother with a small boy in a pushchair and a small girl trotting along beside them. As I pass, this exchange occurs:

- (1) SMALL BOY: Man
ME: Is that your brother
SMALL GIRL: Yes
ME: It takes all sorts
MOTHER: It certainly does

Unexceptional, you might think, but from a pragmaticist's point of view, this exchange, like any other, is far from uninteresting. Let's look at it utterance by utterance.

SMALL BOY: Man

Although this utterance consists only of a single noun, the speaker uses it for a purpose – to demonstrate to himself or to his mother or to his sister or perhaps to all three of them his ability to recognize objects. Perhaps even to show off this ability. As pragmaticists, we see that the form of his utterance (its grammar) and its literal semantic meaning fail to determine its pragmatic function, which we have to work out for ourselves.

ME: Is that your brother

Although I'm not addressed by the small boy and have never met him before, it feels inappropriate to continue walking past without a response, and I find myself opting for a relatively neutral question to his sister. I suppose my use of 'that' rather than 'he' might encode my wish to get my own back on the small boy who's drawn attention to me and caused us all just a little embarrassment. And because I choose the formula 'your brother', rather than, say, 'her brother', I select the small girl as the person who must respond.

SMALL GIRL: Yes

The small girl's minimal answer perhaps suggests that she doesn't think the mild criticism implicit in 'that' is appropriate. Or perhaps that she thinks it's unfair that I've picked her out to respond in a slightly awkward situation.

ME: It takes all sorts

Although I don't identify the person referred to, my idiomatic suggestion that we've a character in our midst is readily taken to refer to the small boy. The utterance also functions as a kind of compliment because it implies that a small infant whose contribution to the exchange has been only a single word has a distinct character and that his small sister is clever enough to understand this pragmatic meaning.

MOTHER: It certainly does

Like 'it takes all sorts', the children's mother's utterance is also indirect, that's to say, she confirms that her small son is a character although she doesn't say this explicitly. Although her comment might in theory be taken to refer to me, in which case it would certainly be an insult, it never occurs to us to take it this way. Thus an exchange that had begun badly for all of us with a small boy making an audible comment about a total stranger ends with everyone feeling good.

Here's another scenario which also had an awkward element to it, but which ended happily. I'm standing at the bar of our local pub having a quiet drink. Two large men have just come in and are standing next to me. The barman is serving them when the barmaid appears and says

- (2) BARMAID: Are you two both together – well you know what I mean
 ME: I was wondering too
 ONE OF THE MEN: That's how rumours get started

Again, if we look at this exchange utterance by utterance, we see that our ability as pragmatically skilled conversationalists to recognize meanings that are implicit rather than explicit is crucial to our understanding.

BARMAID: Are you two both together – well you know what I mean

It's clear from the barmaid's 'you know what I mean' that the optimal meaning of 'are you two both together' is not the meaning she intends. Those familiar with the British pub context know that *Are you together* functions as an offer to serve a person standing beside someone who is already being served. On this occasion, the barmaid fails to produce this optimal form, so her untypical utterance prompts us to search for another possible meaning. Perhaps it's a combination of the slightly dismissive 'you two' and the redundant 'both' which causes the barmaid to realize that she might be thought to be asking the men if they are a gay couple. Her use of 'well' is also crucial – imagine the quite different force the utterance would be likely to have without it. It seems that 'well' mitigates the force of 'you know what I mean' and goes some way to apologizing for the speaker's unfortunate choice of words.

ME: I was wondering too

Although what's just happened has nothing to do with me, I can hardly pretend I haven't heard what was said. Even keeping quiet might be taken to imply that I'm at least considering whether the men standing next to me could be a couple, so it seems safer to speak. Fortunately, my utterance is regarded as a joke rather than as

an assertion of the couple theory. Perhaps the use of 'too' aligns me with the barmaid and her mistake – somehow her pragmatically inappropriate choice of words seems less problematic when someone else states, but does not mean, that they could have made the same mistake.

ONE OF THE MEN: That's how rumours get started

Just as the barmaid commented on the unintended pragmatic meaning of her own utterance, so the customer also refers to her utterance, from which he distances himself with the use of 'that'. And in his use of 'rumours', he implies that he isn't gay. It's also noticeable that it's important to clear up the possible misunderstanding before attending to the matter of whether or not the two men are together and whether one of them may or may not need serving.

Such simple observations about some of the pragmatic properties of these brief, trivial exchanges show how subtle even the most apparently straightforward uses of language are. Pragmatics is about explaining how we produce and understand such everyday but apparently rather peculiar uses of language.

Checking understanding (1.1)

Before we move on, perhaps you would like to try your hand at coming to some conclusions about what is going on in two simple conversations of the kind we have just examined together. The first exchange occurred when I asked for a particular brand of cold capsule at the chemist:

- (3) PHARMACIST: Do you usually have this sort
 PETER: Yeh I think so
 PHARMACIST: They make you drowsy mind
 PETER: Oh are there others that don't

The second exchange occurred when I was buying fruit in the market from a female stallholder:

- (4) STALLHOLDER: Do you want two boxes of grapes for 80p
 PETER: No I don't think so. There aren't any black ones at the moment,
 are there
 STALLHOLDER: No they're just green ones
 PETER: No my wife's very saucy
 STALLHOLDER: <laughs>
 PETER: No I didn't mean that – you know what I mean
 STALLHOLDER: It's just the way you said it

If you want to check your ideas against my suggestions, look at the answer section at the back of this book.

The more you work on conversations like (1)–(4), the more you come to see that it is not so much what the sentences literally mean that matters when we talk as how they reveal the intentions and strategies of the speakers themselves. This point is very well made by Atkinson, Kilby and Roca, who define pragmatics as being to do with "The distinction between what a speaker's words (literally) mean and what the speaker might mean by his words" (1988: 217).

1.2 Properties of everyday language

In the rest of this chapter I am going to discuss some of the features of everyday language use which are important in pragmatics. When we get to the end of the chapter I shall be more systematic and make a number of observations about utterances with the aim of signposting our way through the first few chapters of this book. Meanwhile, the first feature I want to discuss is appropriateness.

1.2.1 Appropriateness

Not very long ago I was standing by the photocopier talking to a female colleague when a female stranger approached us and asked my colleague

(5) Where's the ladies' room

I suppose the speaker judged 'the ladies' room' the most appropriate formula for the **context** and that it would have been inappropriate to explain the reason for her wanting this information. She also clearly thought it appropriate to address her request to my female colleague rather than to me. On the other hand, directing her request at just one rather than both of us seems to encode an awareness of gender. This raises the question of whether encoding or constructing gender is appropriate on university premises, although on balance, I guess the stranger did find the most appropriate formula for the context.

Similar examples of **appropriateness**-driven utterances are easy to find. On another occasion at work I was standing by the porter's office dressed in similar navy blue trousers and pullover to the porter's uniform, when a female student walked up to me and said:

(6) You're not the porter are you

Obviously, there are few contexts in which it's appropriate for a student to say this to a lecturer. But on this occasion, the speaker could hardly stand around waiting for the porter when, judging by the way I was dressed, I might just be the person she was looking for. But as I probably didn't look organized enough to be the porter, and not wanting to make a mistake by asking the wrong person for help, she chose a pessimistic formula as the most appropriate way to frame her inquiry.

At one stage in my career I had a senior colleague who had the bad habit of saying

(7) Are we all here

at exactly the moment a meeting was due to start and only if he could see that we were not all there. His utterance was perfectly attuned to the situation and always had the same effect, that of causing a younger member of our department to get up and go on a missing colleague hunt. On another occasion when we were waiting for a colleague without whom a meeting couldn't start, another colleague said to the person sitting next to her

(8) Shall we go and get Mike

whereupon the person addressed dutifully got up and went to look for him.

Or when I begin a lecture I often call for attention by uttering loudly

(9) Right, shall we begin

which I take to be the most appropriate utterance in the context. When I am feeling mischievous I sometimes begin a first-year pragmatics lecture by saying

(10) May I speak English