

Pragmatic Development

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ESSAYS IN

DEVELOPMENTAL

SCIENCE



Anat Ninio and
Catherine E. Snow

Pragmatic Development

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**Dedicated to our children
Matan, Shira, Nathaniel**

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Anat Ninio
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Introduction: What Is Pragmatics?

1.1 Why study the development of pragmatics?

Consider the following four scenarios, all real incidents:

Example 1.1. Two faculty members whom we'll call Amy and Ben had worked in the same department for several years and had been co-teaching a course since September. In April students in the course gave presentations about their own research in two parallel sessions organized around research themes. Amy and Ben had agreed that one of them would attend each of the sessions. Amy arrived just as the sessions were scheduled to start and encountered Ben in the hall. Conscious of the time, Amy tried to figure out which room she should enter.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Amy (hurriedly): | Are you narrative, or are you emotional development? |
| Ben (slowly): | Well, as you know I've done work on emotional development, in fact I just published a paper on emotional development, and I've done work on narrative development as well, in fact one of the students presenting on narrative development is my advisee and has been working with me on the research she is presenting. |
| Amy (gritting her teeth): | So which session do you want to go to? |

Example 1.2. At a meeting to plan a sales campaign, a middle-aged member of the sales staff we'll call Cal is seated next to a recently hired colleague we'll call Dee; Cal and Dee are friendly in their professional context but have no personal social relationship. About two hours into the meeting, during a discussion of new market development, Dee leans over and whispers to Cal:

Dee: Your left sock is inside out.

Example 1.3. Several convention goers board a courtesy bus scheduled to leave at 7:45 A.M. for the convention center. The bus driver, behind the wheel, is reading a newspaper. Passengers, mostly strangers to one another, are making desultory conversation about the weather, the early hour, the convention, and so on. At 7:52 a middle-aged male passenger seated close to the driver glances at his watch, then says:

Passenger: What time do we get to the convention center?

Driver: When we pull up to the front door.

The general conversation stops. After a noticeable pause, the questioner says:

Passenger: Well, I wouldn't want to get there any sooner.

The bus driver responds, in a noticeably friendlier tone:

Driver: There's so little traffic at this time of day, I'll be too early at the next stop if I leave here on schedule.

Example 1.4. An intensive introductory Spanish class is being taught during the summer session by José, a Puerto Rican doctoral student in Spanish literature. About half an hour into the class one morning, Philip, a college senior taking the course for extra credit, beckons José and whispers something to him. José turns his back to the class and unmistakably (even from the back) zips his fly. He then proceeds with the drill.

The first two scenarios reveal pragmatic failures. In the first case, Amy was evidently insufficiently explicit in seeking information about which session Ben wanted to attend, whereas Ben was somewhat incompetent at judging what kind of information Amy might be seeking. Their minor communicative breakdown was eventually repaired, but not without some potentially negative effect on their relationship—Amy might have exited the interaction thinking Ben was egotistical, and Ben may have been thinking Amy was obtuse, unpleasant consequences for close colleagues.

The second violation involved less a potential for misunderstanding the speaker's intent than a failure to have understanding of her reasons for speaking. Why would someone mention an inside-out sock in a situation where it cannot

be remedied? Why would Dee assume that Cal cared to remedy this relatively minor sartorial deviation? Bringing up a personal failing that is not remediable is clearly rude (*You're bald*, or *That's a nasty scar on your cheek*). On the other hand, as example 1.4 shows, mentioning something that can be fixed might be considered a favor, at least among friends (*You have spinach on your teeth*, or *Can I take this price tag off for you?*). Where does mentioning an inside-out sock at a business meeting fit on this continuum? Is it rude or an invitation to greater intimacy?

The third and fourth examples represent pragmatic successes. After the passenger in 1.3 asked a question that was interpreted as a challenge, the driver created a situation of frank conflict. The passenger would have lost face by accepting the driver's refusal to provide the requested information and might have created an incident by demanding an answer. Instead, he hit upon a response that established an affiliative relationship with the driver, thus providing the driver with a basis for reinterpreting the original question as a simple request for information rather than a complaint. The passenger was clearly a skilled pragmatician, someone we would all like to have around during awkward social situations.

Philip in 1.4 was less adept than the passenger but nonetheless handled a classically difficult situation with some delicacy, managing to convey information about José's state of undress while maintaining at least an illusion of privacy. Although everyone in the class knew what Philip had said, the fact that he whispered it and that José turned his back to zip up created a social fiction that the embarrassing event had never occurred.

1.2 Defining the domain of pragmatic development

Our ultimate goal is to understand how children develop abilities of the types displayed by the bus passenger and by Philip and to consider why violations such as those displayed by Amy, Ben, and Dee are not infrequent. The examples illustrate just a few of the phenomena that comprise pragmatics. Other violations include interrupting a speaker, telling a joke or an anecdote twice to the same person, dominating a conversation, using direct demand forms in social relationships where polite requests are expected and vice versa, failing to answer questions posed by one's interlocutor, using a first name or intimate address form with an elder or a superior, failing to greet acquaintances, and so on. Since the potential for pragmatic violations is vast, coming to understand how it is that most adults end up abiding by most pragmatic rules most of the time is a considerable challenge.

Obviously, development does not consist only of learning to avoid violations. Before children can learn in which social situation it is appropriate to emit a direct demand and in which a polite request, they have to understand what demands and requests are and learn the verbal forms for their expression. A

three-month-old can neither order people around nor ask them nicely for a favor. Similarly, she fails to answer questions not out of impoliteness but because she has not yet learned that questions and answers exist in the social world. Thus, even before the sophisticated abilities involved in the avoidance of pragmatic violations are considered, we need to understand the acquisition of the fundamental store of knowledge necessary for the social uses of language. Children need to learn how to formulate their social moves through language in a form interpretable by their interlocutors and to interpret correctly the interpersonal significance of others' verbal overtures. The acquisition of these skills is the topic of this volume.

What is the extent of the pragmatic rules children must learn? Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with speech use, and studies of pragmatic development are concerned with how children acquire the knowledge necessary for the appropriate, effective, rule-governed employment of speech in interpersonal situations. Like developmental psychology in general, studies of pragmatic development address questions of the following sort: What is the age of onset of particular skills? By what processes are these skills acquired by the child? What factors influence the speed and order of acquisition of these skills? What sorts of individual differences emerge? Questions just like these are also asked about the acquisition of both grammar and the lexicon. What distinguishes pragmatics is the considerable disagreement about exactly what knowledge and skills constitute the domain of pragmatic development.

Those who study pragmatics struggle to define their domain of inquiry so it does not become coextensive with linguistics on the one hand and so it remains distinct from the rules that govern all of social interaction on the other. Traditionally, linguistics is parsed as having three domains of analysis: grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. These are distinguished by the criteria for correctness or adequacy used to assess performance. Grammatical rules prescribe formal correctness, and violation of these rules produces ungrammatical sentences that might, however, be perfectly adequate in the semantic and pragmatic domains, for example, *The door are open. Could you please to close it?* Semantics is the system that prescribes meaningfulness and provides rules that enable sentences to be judged as uninterpretable (*The most eligible bachelor of Peoria just got married for the fourth time*), false (*Two plus two makes seven*), or meaningless (*Hordes of principles contemplate curtain rods*) although perhaps grammatical. Pragmatic rules, on the other hand, define appropriate and effective language use—using language in such a way that one's own communicative goals are achieved without giving offense or causing misunderstanding. Thus, grammatical, meaningful, true sentences (e.g., *Your left sock is inside out*) might well violate pragmatic rules of appropriateness.

We have defined developmental pragmatics, then, as the acquisition of "knowledge necessary for the appropriate, effective, rule-governed employment of speech in interpersonal situations." This apparently simple definition soon leads us, though, into considerable complexity. Clearly, children have to learn

how to use language in order to make statements, to ask questions, to request, to greet, to refuse, and so on; these are the so-called *illocutionary* speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). These are manifest communicative acts for which a speaker expresses a willingness to be held accountable that are furthermore characterized by the presence, at least some of the time, of overt linguistic markings, such as the interrogative grammatical mood for questions. Even in cases when such explicit linguistic markers of intents are absent, for example, in indirect requests, the linguistic community shares certain conventions for the expression of communicative intents in utterances. Without such shared guidelines, we would be unable to interpret correctly what type of illocutionary act speakers intend their interlocutors to hear them making. Illocutionary acts thus qualify as a clear instance of linguistically signaled uses of speech that are appropriate and effective only when produced in accordance with certain rules. Speech acts, therefore, are centrally within our domain of inquiry.

Where, though, should we draw the limits of linguistic pragmatics? When the British heroine of the movie *L.A. Stories*, on first arriving in Los Angeles, makes a mildly dirty joke in front of a group of locals in a restaurant, she shocks everyone speechless. English is her native language, and she has no problem being understood at the level of lexicon, grammar, or illocutionary intent. Nevertheless, she has committed a violation of the rules that govern speech use in her host community. Although in Britain well-bred women can tell jokes using four-letter words in polite company, in certain Los Angeles circles one cannot. This generalization, which most people would relegate without argument to the domain of pragmatics, is a cultural norm defining correct behavior in London versus Los Angeles, equivalent to other cross-cultural differences like *Use a knife and a fork throughout the meal* in London versus *Cut your meat into small pieces at first, then transfer your fork to your right hand and use only that to actually consume the meal* in Los Angeles.

Rules about using both four-letter words and forks might be found in books of etiquette that prescribe social niceties; we lack guidelines about how politeness rules for speech should be distinguished from politeness rules for the use of cutlery, precedence rules for entering and leaving rooms, rules for sitting down and getting up, rules for shaking hands, for how to dress, for offering and accepting food, and so on. Politeness rules for speech form an integrated system with the societal regulation of interpersonal behavior in general. To describe linguistic politeness rules and to study how children are socialized into using them, we need to consider the totality of a culture. An analogy is the linguist's attempt to chart the semantics of the kinship terminology within a newly discovered language; describing kinship terms and the rules for their use requires an understanding of social relations, rules for marriage and inheritance, customs regarding who is responsible for rearing, naming, educating, and indulging children, rules concerning who can live together, who can eat together, and so on. All of this knowledge is prerequisite to defining terms like *aunt* or *cousin* (see Goldfield & Snow, 1992). Consider, for example, the use of

the terms *Auntie* and *Uncle* for older family friends in American English—a ‘meaning’ for aunt and uncle that can only be understood by considering the nature of social relations between the older and the younger generations, within and outside families. The study of kinship terms, at its core a linguistic issue, has been a cornerstone of modern anthropological analyses of entire societies (Goodenough, 1951; Wallace & Atkins, 1960); similarly, linguistic pragmatics inherently involves the study of culture and society.

Are we saying, then, that a developmental pragmaticist who is interested in the acquisition of the polite uses of speech must become an anthropologist? Some researchers in this domain *are* in fact anthropologists, interested in the socialization of culturally varying behavior. Others—psychologists or linguists by training—acquire the required expertise in cultural analysis. Most studies of how children are taught to speak in pragmatically appropriate ways include background information on the social structure and familial arrangements of the society under study, and many provide information about social and personality development, not just about issuing directives, selecting forms of address, and other such linguistic politeness rules.

We have come a long way from what we originally defined as a psychological-developmental study of one of the branches of linguistic knowledge. It is impossible to study or to understand certain kinds of language behavior without straying into the study of societies and cultures. It is, furthermore, very difficult to draw the lines among those culturally determined phenomena that have to do with language proper, those that are incidentally carried out by speaking, and those that merge linguistic and cultural rules. For example, the rules for “polite” speech forms in Japanese are described in grammar books, but employing them correctly requires an understanding of social categories like gender, age, and class.

The distinction between linguistic pragmatics and culture is not the only fuzzy boundary to be dealt with. Pragmatics has an interface as well with skill at producing great literature, sermons, and political speeches. For example, was Martin Luther King’s success in moving people’s hearts and minds through his public speaking attributable to his exceptionally good grasp of the rules of rhetoric, pragmatic rules that can be described formally? Or was King’s success attributable to the depth of his understanding of and empathy for his listeners? In other words, is being an effective—as opposed to an errorless—communicator part of an individual’s *linguistic* abilities in any sense?

To take another, more mundane example: Ken has a chronically noisy neighbor who ignores all entreaties to be quieter. At 2:00 A.M. the neighbor has his TV blaring. Ken, yet again, knocks on the door and says, *Your TV is very loud*. The neighbor responds characteristically, *So what?* and slams the door in Ken’s face. This was an ineffective request.

An hour later Ray, Ken’s cousin who is visiting from out of town, has had enough of the noise. He knocks on the neighbor’s door, but instead of repeating Ken’s indirect appeals assumes a furious expression and says, *If you don’t turn*

your TV down immediately, I'll call the police. The neighbor complies. This was an effective request.

Why did Ken not use this effective strategy? We could say that he is not assertive enough, that he has a shy and mild personality. We could even call him a coward, someone who lets himself be bullied because he is unable to stand up for his rights. In other words, we might be inclined to seek an explanation for his failure in terms of his character and his understanding of human-affairs rather than in terms of some deficit in his knowledge of language per se.

Another story. Peter and Susan are watching a police drama on TV. Just as the hero is about to be pushed into the path of an oncoming train, Peter turns to Susan and says, *Maybe we should go to Florida for our vacation instead of Oregon, what do you think?* Susan says *Shh!* This is clearly an ineffective suggestion. But would anyone who saw Peter's utterance written down on the page without the accompanying story be able to say there was anything wrong with it as a potential suggestion? Peter may not have very good timing, but he certainly knows how to formulate a standard suggestion.

The issues of what makes someone a convincing public speaker, an effectively assertive neighbor, or a sensitive spouse are interesting and important ones. But are the skills necessary for effective speech use—for getting oneself heard, for convincing an audience, for getting one's way, for intentionally impressing, pleasing, annoying, or amusing others—actually language skills? Perhaps language skills only include knowing how to put a sentence together, so it sounds like a suggestion and not the ability to avoid blurting out the suggestion at an inappropriate moment. Or perhaps this distinction is artificial, and everything to do with the use of speech in interpersonal situations—the timing, the intonation, the precise choice of words, the selected degree of forcefulness—is a choice based on a person's pragmatic know-how. We simply don't know where to draw the line between linguistic pragmatics and social effectiveness.

The problem of drawing the boundary between (formal language structure and) (social language use) is ubiquitous in linguistic analysis. How does one interpret a sentence like *The city will fall tomorrow* unless one knows a great deal about the conditions of its use: the date on which it was produced, the qualifications of the speaker to make such a pronouncement, and the identity of the audience? Is it a threat or a prediction, a statement about a state of affairs or a request for aid? Whereas formal linguists might decline to describe the illocutionary force of the utterance as an issue outside grammar or semantics, they do have to deal with interpreting words like tomorrow (and an additional very long list of deictic and indexical lexical items), whose meanings depend crucially on conditions of use.

Indeed, it is far from clear that we can distinguish between language in the abstract and its use. An influential school of thought chiefly associated with Wittgenstein (1953), which has considerable following among other philoso-

phers and linguists (e.g., Allwood, 1981; Alston, 1964; Fillmore, 1971; Gibbs, 1984; Grice, 1957; Strawson, 1970), argues that all linguistics is nothing but a question of speech use, of pragmatics. In this view, the formal aspects of language—lexicon, grammar—are no more than tools for the production of intelligible speech acts. Focusing on a limited aspect of language, such as morphology, might mislead one into thinking it is an autonomous system, a separate field of inquiry. But a broader, deeper look prevents one from elevating the means to the status of end. Although working out the details of such a holistic, use-conditional language system is extremely difficult, formal grammars built on pragmatic principles have been suggested by several linguists (e.g., Dik, 1978; Halliday, 1985; Van Valin, 1993). If these so-called Functional Grammars are successful, all boundaries between pragmatics and other aspects of language may be obliterated.

The difficulty of limiting the proper concerns of pragmatics is perhaps best illustrated in the context of a fundamental question: What is a meaningful sentence? What is it that turns a vocalization into a means of conveying thought from person to person? This is an extremely complex question that might be illuminated with a negative example. Baier (1967) gave the following example for the entry “Nonsense” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: a person uttering the sentence *The water is now boiling* in the middle of a marriage ceremony. Even though the sentence itself is a perfectly ordinary declarative sentence and everybody hearing it understands the words, nobody can understand why it was said. The use the speaker had in mind for that sentence in those circumstances, for that audience, is incomprehensible. It is impossible to attribute any kind of point to this utterance, so in spite of its impeccable grammar and vocabulary it is meaningless. One needs, however, to know all sorts of things about marriage ceremonies to understand why the speaker should not have produced this utterance unless he wanted to be hospitalized as insane. Goffman (1983), in a posthumous article “Felicity’s Condition,” pointed out that violating the rules and conventions that tie sentences to their contexts is at best socially inappropriate and ultimately makes for an intolerable breach of normality, a violation society cannot condone. Our question is whether the knowledge required to produce meaningful utterances in the wedding context (knowledge about society’s arrangements for the public ratification of personal relations, about religion and sanctity, about ritual and its functions) is properly included under knowledge of *language*. The concept of meaningfulness appeals to a very large and a priori unspecifiable store of information about the contexts in which talk takes place; apparently, people must master, remember, and constantly monitor an encyclopedic store of facts in order to produce meaningful utterances and interpret others’ speech as intelligible.

This problem does not emerge only when speakers produce full sentences. Even interpreting a single word in most uses requires an encyclopedic rather than a dictionary-based level of knowledge about the word’s meaning. A familiar example of this phenomenon, from Schank and Abelson (1977), is the im-