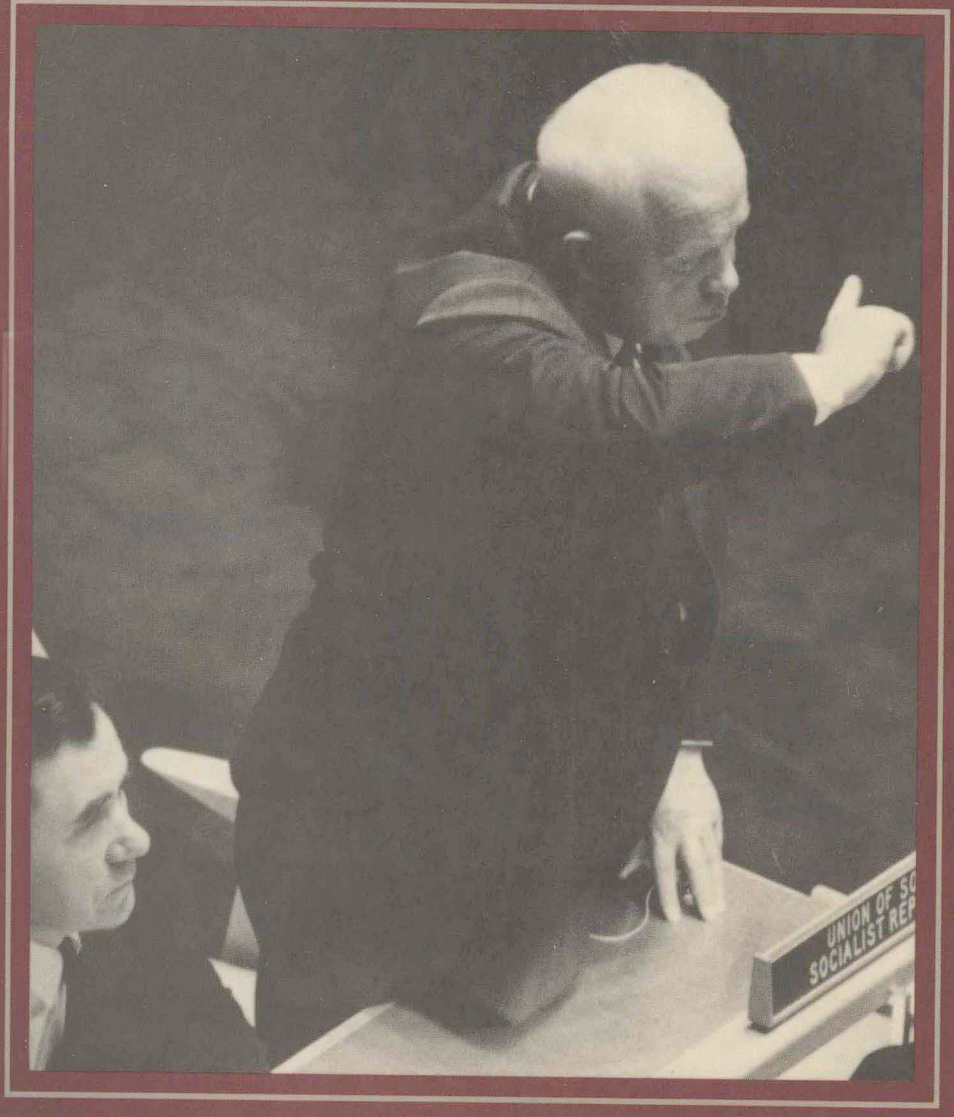
Politically Speaking



John Wilson

Politically Speaking

The Pragmatic Analysis of Political Language

John Wilson

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Editor's Preface

The language of politics is something we are all exposed to and involved in, and something we all have preconceptions about. In this book, John Wilson subjects the language used by and about politicians to analysis from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics. This means that he looks at political language in its social context of use, and that he is particularly concerned to investigate meanings inherent in political talk over and above what has actually been said or written on any given occasion. He is concerned with what speakers do not say as well as with what they do say, and with the implications and underlying assumptions associated with what is and is not said. In so doing, he shows that preconceptions we might have about political talk being manipulative are not unfounded, but he also demonstrates how listeners too bring unstated assumptions with them in their interpretation of political discourse. The book provides many very interesting insights into the use of language in politics in the Western world and is also an important contribution to pragmatics theory. Sociolinguists like Wilson are uniquely qualified to submit speech used in real-life situations to linguistic and social analyses, and this book, lying as it does at the intersection of linguistic and societal concerns, represents an excellent contribution to the study of language in society.

Peter Trudgill

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Introduction

This book is concerned with the analysis of political talk from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics. Pragmatics, as a sub-discipline of linguistics, is an area of some confusion and controversy. The confusion arises from the difficulties involved in delimiting the boundaries of the area (see Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Verschueren, 1987; Horn, 1988); the controversy, like so many in linguistics, is concentrated on the legitimacy of particular methodological and theoretical approaches to pragmatic questions (see Newmeyer, 1980).

There are those who believe that pragmatics must concentrate only on the role and functioning of meaning as it is displayed within the linguistic system: i.e. on how context becomes encoded (grammaticalized) within the structures of the language (see Gazdar, 1979; Kempson, 1979; Levinson, 1983); others will certainly show an interest in the linguistic system, but will also focus on the formal status of socially or interactionally oriented rules of behaviour (Grice, 1975) as they operate in guiding the communication process. Under at least one interpretation, one which treats 'conversation analysis' (see Levinson, 1983: chapter 6) as pragmatics, only those rules generated through the inductive analysis of participant activities are legitimate empirical pragmatic phenomena.

These distinctions are perceived rather than real, and there is a great deal of overlap within pragmatic work. One need not be constrained to only one particular viewpoint however, and as Horn (1988) notes, it is always possible to offer a mixed account of specific pragmatic phenomena. To a greater or lesser extent, this is the approach adopted in this book. Although the analysis has been heavily influenced by the Anglo-American view of linguistic pragmatics, various different theoretical and methodological ingredients will be added where these are seen as relevant or necessary in exploring particular issues. In many ways this approach is consonant with the definition of *linguistic*

pragmatics adopted by Green (1989: 2): 'Linguistic pragmatics . . . is at the intersection of a number of fields within and outside cognitive science: not only linguistics, cognitive psychology, and philosophy, . . . but also sociology . . . and rhetoric.'

The mixed approach (to use Horn's phrase) seems particularly relevant where one is involved in an applied exercise (see Ochs and Schieffelin, 1979; Tannen, 1979; McTear, 1986; Stenton, 1987; Wilson, 1989). My aim is not to resolve the many controversial theoretical issues which abound within pragmatics, but rather to highlight, in the case of political talk, the various insights which may be gained from the application of selected pragmatic concepts. The term selective is apt, in that one could not hope to cover, or apply, in this book, all the myriad techniques and conceptual components of a linguistic pragmatics which encompasses detailed scholarship from within a variety of intersecting disciplines.

Nevertheless, having said that, I will not shy away from theoretical controversy where it impinges on any particular analytic question raised by the application of pragmatic concepts. Consequently, on occasion, as well as elucidating certain aspects of political talk, I may also indulge in contributing to core theoretical debate. This is particularly the case in chapters 4 and 5, where core theoretical issues are explored in conjunction with an applied perspective on political talk (see below). This has been necessary in that pragmatics, as an area, is relatively new, and, consequently, is still in the process of establishing sound and agreed parameters of practice, along with concise definitions of core categories and accepted procedures of analysis. Applying pragmatic theory is not always simply a case of matching data to concept, but may involve the development of specified concepts, or the introduction of new concepts. This is where application feeds back into the development of theory, and in some respects it is hoped that this book contributes not only to our understanding of how the pragmatics of political language operates, but also to the ongoing development of a pragmatic theory of language itself.

The term 'applied' has been used several times now, and in one sense this book may be seen as an exercise in *applied pragmatics*, defined here as the study of the selection and manipulation of pragmatic elements within specified communicative contexts. In one respect the term 'applied pragmatics' is odd, in that if pragmatics focuses on meaning in context, then applied pragmatics, presumbly, focuses on meaning *in context in context*. The conclusion need not be so absurd, however, and a simple example here will help clarify the issues.

Take the case of verbs like regret. Such verbs are known as factive verbs, in that, pragmatically, they are said to presuppose the truth of their complements. For example, if I say, 'John regrets beating his dog,' then we assume that it is the case that John has in fact beaten his dog. The behaviour of presuppositional verbs is quite complicated (see chapter 2; also Levinson, 1983; Green, 1989), but, in general, since they carry an implication of truth, they would not seem particularly useful in the case of lying.

In a study by Epstein (1982) this was in fact the conclusion. Epstein analysed the distribution of factive and non-factive forms in the testimony of the major figures involved in the Watergate trials (*The White House Transcripts*, 1974). In comparing the output of John Ehrlichman, John Dean and Richard Nixon, it was noted that 'both Ehrlichman and Nixon used an overwhelming, and therefore disproportionate, number of non-factives' (Epstein, 1982: 136). As we now know, at the time of the trials, Dean was telling the truth, the claims of others being clearly lies, or close to the edge of truth. Seemingly, in this case, the degree to which one was lying was matched by an avoidance of factive verbs, and, conversely, the degree to which one was telling the truth matched with an increased incidence of factive forms.

This simple example indicates one way in which an applied pragmatics can offer some insight into communicative intentions as they operate within a specific context. It is not suggested that every time a politician (or anyone else) avoids factive verbs they are lying; the process of lying, however, may, it seems, be supported by a direct manipulation of pragmatic aspects of the language system as it is employed in communicative contexts.

Pragmatic Arguments: the Mix

But what, then, do I mean by the term pragmatics? The details of the problems involved in exact definitions and delimitations of the area of pragmatics are available in the work of Leech (1983), Levinson (1983), Verschueren (1987), Horn (1988) and Green (1989), so I will not repeat them here. Rather, let me explain in brief the pragmatic perspective adopted in this book.

First, I want to argue that pragmatics is concerned with the way in which meanings are constructed or calculated within particular contexts of interaction, the simple meaning in context view (Levinson, 1983). Central to this is the fact that we can mean much more than what we say. Such a claim is the core of Grice's theory of conversation,

and is endorsed, from a completely different perspective, by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970: 342) when they say 'speakers in the situated particulars of speech mean something different than what they say.' The question is, how are we to explain this process? How does one account for the fact that there is meaning beyond the words produced by any speaker within a particular context?

The answer one provides to this question is in part dependent upon the theoretical perspective one brings to bear, as much as whether the answer is the best one for the job. Linguists, for example, have turned to pragmatics as their theories of semantics have become radically inadequate as accounts not only of how people understand each other, but as accounts of the role of meaning within a language system with interacting levels of structure. Philosophers, for very similar reasons, have converged on pragmatics as a way of dealing with those troublesome sentences which do not easily sit within particular truth-based formalisms. Sociologists, influenced (at least originally) by a phenomenologically motivated view of explanations of social reality, have turned to the study of how meaning is constructed by participants themselves, not by some pre-formalistic view of what meaning should be like.

In order to look at what all this means, and what exactly the differences are between these viewpoints, I want to suggest that we have three types of pragmatically based argument: the L-pragmatic argument, i.e. one which focuses only on how contextual meaning is encoded in the language system; the P-pragmatic argument, an account based on rules or general principles of behaviour, which although generally reflected in the linguistic system may be found beyond this; and the O-pragmatic argument, where meaning is constructed through the orderly negotiation of talk within contexts.

The L-pragmatic argument is a conventionalized one, and assumes that there are certain forms and structures within the linguistic system which act in specific pragmatic ways. A classic case here would be the concept of a *presupposition*. Although presuppositions are somewhat controversial (see Karttunen and Peters, 1979; Oh and Dineen, 1979), they are, in the main, associated with specific elements of language structure (although one can talk of social presuppositions, or psychological presuppositions; Green (1989) also uses the term 'connotative presupposition'; for a general discussion see Bates, 1976). Levinson (1983) highlights a number of these, ranging from definite descriptions to adverbial clauses. The important point is that presuppositions, as inferences, are based on the lexical item or clausal structure chosen, and fall directly, therefore, within the realm of linguistics.

A similar argument has been made for certain types of implicatures, specifically what Gazdar (1979) has called scalar and clausal implicatures. Here we have a kind of L-pragmatic/P-pragmatic mix. The argument is that for certain sets of linguistic elements, for example the quantificational range 'all, some, not many', where a lower bounded element is chosen it implies that negation of all higher bounded elements above it. If I say 'some of the boys are happy,' I am said to implicate (scalar) that 'not all of the boys are happy.' This rule emerges from the fact that, according to the principles of behaviour outlined by Grice (1975), one should not say that which is false, or for which one lacks adequate evidence. Consequently, if I knew that all the boys were happy then I would have said so.

Although Gricean principles are essentially independent of the linguistic system, in this sense they can be motivated in an account of a specific linguistic phenomenon, i.e. quantificational selection and interpretation. For this reason, such examples would still be treated as L-pragmatic types. In general, however, Gricean principles, and other principles of behaviour, may be utilized to account for actions which are not (or not only) purely linguistic; in this case we would have a P-pragmatic account.

An example might be the use of 'It's cold in here' to convey, through indirect means, that the speaker wants the window closed. In order to explain how this utterance means something other than simply a description of relative temperature, we might invoke the concepts of intentionality (Davidson, 1984; Searle, 1983) and rationality, and perhaps elements like beliefs, desires and wants (see Leech, 1983; Bratman, 1984; Wilks, 1986; Wilson, 1989). We might construct an argument from the speaker's desire to be warm, to his/her belief that he/she will be warm if the window is closed, and that the hearer will close the window if requested to do so. Rationally speaking, therefore, if the speaker wishes to be warm he/she should request the closing of the window.

This would not explain why the speaker did not simply say 'close the window' however. In order to explain this, we would have to invoke cultural as well as purely logical or rational principles. Principles of *face* wants and desires, for example, or principles of tact and politeness (see Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1978). Since all these various strategies and principles may operate independently of the linguistic system, they are not directly linguistic phenomena; although they may be utilized to assist in the explanation of linguistic phenomena (as noted above; see also Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

The O-pragmatic account focuses on the orderly construction of meaning as it is negotiated within a context of interaction. This radical

perspective provides no pre-theoretical guidelines; meaning is an ongoing accomplishment. Silverman (1973: 176) notes that within interaction, 'people find out by the replies to their statements what they were taken to be talking about in the first place.' This approach, in one sense, denies the legitimacy of the application of the L-pragmatic and P-pragmatic approaches to actual talk, since both approaches would, of necessity, impose meaning on the structures employed via both linguistic and socially or rationally motivated principles of behaviour. Such pre-formalizations would be rejected by the O-pragmatic's perspective, since meaning is not imposed from the outside, as it were, but negotiated through the interactional construction of talk.

The O-pragmatic approach has had a widespread influence on the pragmatic study of conversation (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; papers in Schenkein, 1978), and a number of O-pragmatic analysts have focused on the organization of political talk (see for example, Atkinson, 1984; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986), an issue which we will look at in more detail in chapter 1. Nevertheless, there is some confusion within this perspective, since it is hard to see how claims about practical reasoning, or negotiation, could be predicated without some prior knowledge of the language, or indeed social and rational principles of behaviour (see Wilson, 1989: chapter 6; also chapter 6 below).

The fact that one can describe the orderly operation of conversation without reference to prior formal rules of language or principles of behaviour does not indicate that they are not in operation at a level beyond the gross manifestation of the talk itself. In phenomenological terms, while one may not need the law of gravity to explain our accepted understanding that stone will fall if I drop it from a height, it does not suggest that such laws do not exist, nor that they cannot be fruitfully explained in a manner beyond the limits of the context of an individual experience (see Gurwitsch, 1978; Husserl, 1962).

The most important fact about the O-pragmatic approach from the perspective of this book is that it draws our attention to the role of sequencing in the construction of pragmatic meaning; the fact that meaning may be constructed, reformulated and changed across turns. But this process, in my view, is best understood where we have some (formal) idea of the tools and structures the participants are drawing upon in this process of development and manipulation.

These three pragmatic positions need not be mutually exclusive, and may enlighten each other within a mixed perspective. This is not to say that every problem must be tackled in a tripartite manner,

merely that particular problems within the applied field may be more thoroughly grounded where the analyst is open to the various analytic options available to him/her.

This is the approach adopted in this book. Political talk will be considered from a pragmatic perspective by focusing centrally on meanings which may be derived beyond the context of what has been said. Following, and extending, Lycan (1986) these meanings will be referred to as *implicative relations* (see chapter 1). The aim of the book is to explain, pragmatically, how these relations operate, and in doing this we will draw on a range of arguments from the L- P- and O-pragmatic positions. The validity of this approach resides in the adequacy and insights provided by each analytic account. These accounts are not and cannot be exhaustive, but reflect a selective interest on the part of the author.

In brief then, pragmatics refers here simply to the analysis of meaning which is beyond what has been said, and it is accepted that locating each meaning may involve more than one procedural method of analysis.

The Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 begins by considering, in general, the area of political talk, and looks at a widely held conception that one of the main functions of political talk is to manipulate political thought. This seems a particularly significant case of using language to mean more than is said. It is argued, however, that we must be careful in making claims regarding such manipulation, since it is difficult, if not impossible, within a variable and contextually relative linguistic system, to claim that one has discovered a single and underlying immutable truth. The paradoxical consequences of this position are briefly explored, and the working basis of a pragmatic case is developed from the premise that much political language depends on implications rather than factual claims. Since implications may be cancelled, it becomes difficult to prove, beyond doubt, that any meaning which may be interpreted beyond what is said was intentionally projected.

Chapter 2 takes up the implicational argument and explores it in some detail through the application of two core implicational types, presupposition and conversational implicature, as they apply in a selected debate from the British House of Commons.

Chapter 3 looks at an area clearly pragmatically marked within the linguistic system, that of pronominals. The chapter argues that the

pronominal system of English may be manipulated not only for implicational effect, in terms of the protection of the political self through the distributional control of projected responsibility (from the 'I' to the 'we' for example), but also for the building of an ideological perspective reflecting specific social values and beliefs.

Chapter 4 further takes up the issue of the political distribution of responsibility and extends it beyond pronominals to the area of self and other referencing. A core piece of political data is explored from a variety of broadly pragmatic perspectives, and makes use of the mixed approach in solving a case of what I will call 'self-reference under protection'.

Chapter 5 looks at the use of metaphor within political talk. The area of the pragmatics of metaphor is explored in some detail, and a theory of *within text* (local) and *across text* (global) metaphorical use is introduced in producing a pragmatic account of political metaphor.

Chapter 6 offers a broad-ranging account of the pragmatic force and function of questions and answers within political encounters. Question types are explored within the contexts of broadcast interviews, parliamentary debates and presidential press conferences.