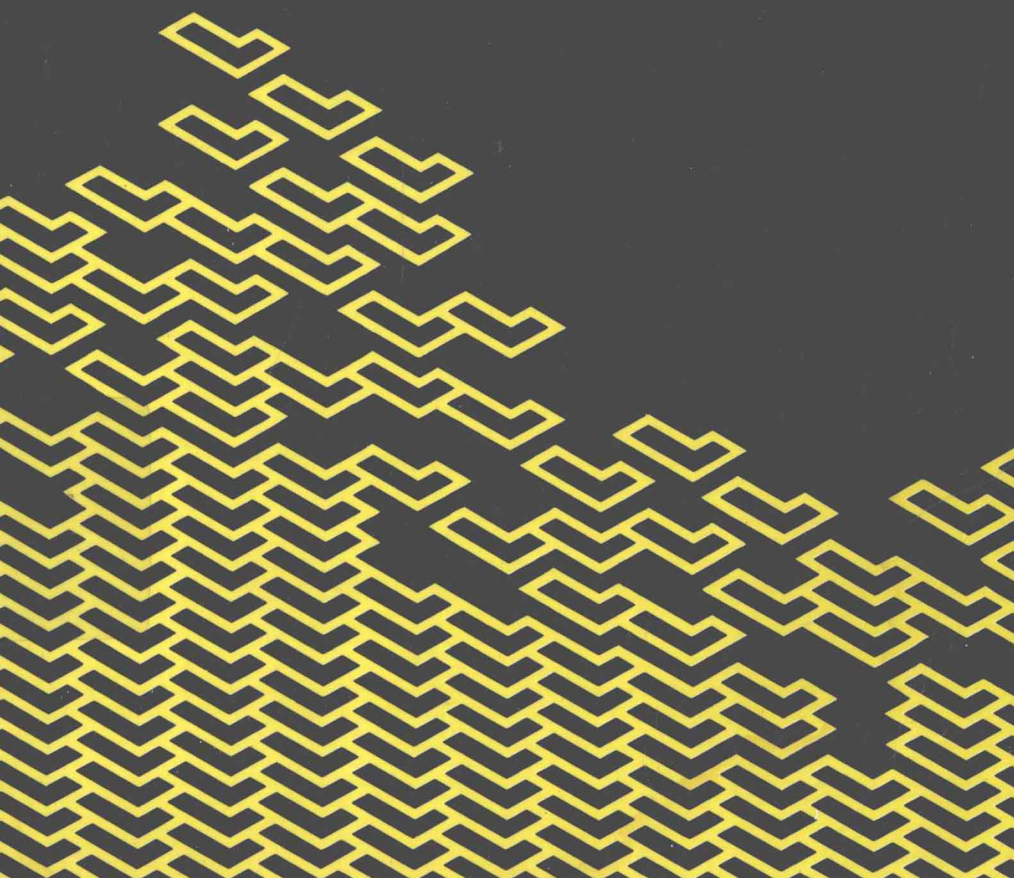


Principles of Pragmatics

Geoffrey N Leech



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Preface

Pragmatics can be usefully defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations. In this book I present a *complementarist* view of pragmatics within an overall programme for studying language as a communication system. Briefly, this means studying the use of a language as distinct from, but complementary to, the language itself seen as a formal system. Or more briefly still: grammar (in its broadest sense) must be separated from pragmatics. To argue this, it is not sufficient to define pragmatics negatively, as that aspect of linguistic study which cannot be accommodated in linguistics proper. Rather, one must develop theories and methods of description which are peculiar to pragmatics itself, and show that these have to be different from those which are appropriate to grammar. The domain of pragmatics can then be defined so as to delimit it from grammar, and at the same time to show how the two fields combine within an integrated framework for studying language.

Up to now, the strongest influences on those developing a pragmatic paradigm have been the formulation of a view of meaning in terms of illocutionary force by Austin and Searle, and of a view of meaning in terms of conversational implicature by Grice. These have also been the strongest influences on the ideas I present here. But my approach to pragmatics is by way of the thesis that communication is problem-solving. A speaker, *qua* communicator, has to solve the problem: 'Given that I want to bring about such-and-such a result in the hearer's consciousness, what is the best way to accomplish this aim by using language?' For the hearer, there is another kind of problem to solve: 'Given that the speaker said such-and-such, what did the speaker mean me to understand by that?' This conception of communication

leads to a rhetorical approach to pragmatics, whereby the speaker is seen as trying to achieve his aims within constraints imposed by principles and maxims of 'good communicative behaviour'. In this not only Grice's Cooperative Principle, but other principles such as those of Politeness and Irony play an important role. To sum up: pragmatics differs from grammar in that it is essentially goal-directed and evaluative. I hope that, through this orientation, this book will help to bring about a new *rapprochement* between grammar and rhetoric.

Chapter 1 sketches the historical and intellectual background to the present study, and proposes a set of postulates which are enlarged upon in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 3 advocates a combination of formalist and functionalist viewpoints in the philosophy of linguistics. Chapter 4 begins a more descriptive part of the book, which develops the application of the maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle within the more general framework of an Interpersonal Rhetoric. Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on other maxims of the Interpersonal Rhetoric, notably maxims of politeness. The framework which has been elaborated in these three chapters is then put to descriptive use in an account of how a limited area of English grammar – the grammar of certain negative and interrogative sentence types – is pragmatically implemented in English. The title 'Communicative Grammar' has been reasonably applied to a linguistic description which, like this one, relates grammatical forms to their various pragmatic utilizations. After this practical demonstration, Chapters 8 and 9 return to more polemical matters. They argue that a rhetorical view of pragmatics requires us to take a different view of performatives and of illocutionary acts from that which is familiar in the 'classical' speech-act formulations of Austin and Searle. The view is put forward that Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts should be interpreted as a semantic taxonomy of speech-act verbs.

I have benefited from many discussions of these issues with colleagues and with audiences both in Britain and overseas. I am particularly grateful to a group of postgraduate students at Lancaster who discussed the first draft of this book with me: they include Susan George, Andrew McNab, Dilys Thorp, and last but not least, Jennifer Thomas, to whom I am also indebted for subsequent discussions and criticisms. A colleague at Lancaster, R. L. V. Hale, has done me the favour of casting a searching but friendly philosophical eye over several chapters, and suggesting a number of improvements. My co-editor of the Longman Linguistics Library, Professor R. H. Robins, has also kindly given me the benefit of his comments on the final manuscript. The customary

disclaimer that I alone am responsible for the shortcomings of this book is particularly appropriate here: on a subject so controversial as the present one, even my most benevolent critics have found – and no doubt will find – enough cause for disagreement.

I acknowledge with thanks the permission granted by John Benjamins, B. V., Amsterdam, to reprint, as part of Chapter 7 of the present work, part of the paper 'Pragmatics and conversational rhetoric' which I contributed to Herman Parret, Marina Sbisà, and Jef Verschueren, eds, *Possibilities and Limitations of Pragmatics*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981.

University of Lancaster
May 1982

G . N. L.

A note on symbols

The symbols s and h are used throughout the book to symbolize 'speaker(s) or writer(s)' and 'hearer(s) or reader(s)' respectively. A subscript added to one of these symbols indicates that the person referred to is a participant in the primary speech situation, secondary speech situation, etc. For example, s_1 means 'primary speaker', s_2 means 'secondary speaker'.

The symbols $\uparrow s$, $\uparrow h$, $\downarrow s$, and $\downarrow h$ are interpreted as follows:

- $\uparrow s$ = 'desirable for the speaker'
- $\uparrow h$ = 'desirable for the addressee'
- $\downarrow s$ = 'undesirable for the speaker'
- $\downarrow h$ = 'undesirable for the addressee'

Additional abbreviations are:

CP = 'Cooperative Principle'

PP = 'Politeness Principle'

IP = 'Irony Principle'

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The aim of science is increase of verisimilitude

[Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, p. 71]

In a broad sense, this book is about the nature of human language. In a narrower sense, it is about one aspect of human language, which I believe is important for understanding human language as a whole. This aspect I shall call **GENERAL PRAGMATICS**.

1.1 Historical preamble

The subject of 'pragmatics' is very familiar in linguistics today. Fifteen years ago it was mentioned by linguists rarely, if at all. In those far-off-seeming days, pragmatics tended to be treated as a rag-bag into which recalcitrant data could be conveniently stuffed, and where it could be equally conveniently forgotten. Now, many would argue, as I do, that we cannot really understand the nature of language itself unless we understand pragmatics: how language is used in communication.

How has this change come about?¹ In part, the whole of the recent history of linguistics can be described in terms of successive discoveries that what has gone headlong into the rag-bag can be taken out again and sewed and patched into a more or less presentable suit of clothes. To the generation which followed Bloomfield, linguistics meant phonetics, phonemics, and if one was daring—morphophonemics; but syntax was considered so abstract as to be virtually beyond the horizon of discovery. All this changed after Chomsky, in the later 1950s, discovered the centrality of syntax; but like the structuralists, he still regarded meaning as altogether too messy for serious contemplation. In the earlier 1960s (for by this time the pace of linguistic advance had quickened) Katz and his collaborators (Katz and Fodor 1963; Katz and Postal 1964; Katz 1964) began to find out how to in-

corporate meaning into a formal linguistic theory, and it was not long before the 'California or bust' spirit led to a colonization of pragmatics. Lakoff, with others, was soon arguing (1971) that syntax could not be legitimately separated from the study of language use. So pragmatics was henceforth on the linguistic map. Its colonization was only the last stage of a wave-by-wave expansion of linguistics from a narrow discipline dealing with the physical data of speech, to a broad discipline taking in form, meaning, and context.

But this is only part of the story. First, all the names mentioned in the preceding paragraph are American, for it describes the progress of mainstream American linguistics. It is probably more true of linguistics than of other subjects that its dominating influences have been American; but we should not forget that many influential scholars, both in the USA and elsewhere, have continued to work outside the 'American mainstream'. We should not overlook independent thinkers such as Firth, with his early emphasis on the situational study of meaning, and Halliday, with his comprehensive social theory of language. And equally important, we should not overlook the influences of philosophy. When linguistic pioneers such as Ross and Lakoff staked a claim in pragmatics in the late 1960s, they encountered there an indigenous breed of philosophers of language who had been quietly cultivating the territory for some time. In fact, the more lasting influences on modern pragmatics have been those of philosophers; notably, in recent years, Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Grice (1975).

The widening scope of linguistics involved a change in the view of what language is, and how linguistics should define its subject. The American structuralists were happiest with the idea that linguistics was a physical science, and therefore did their best to rid the subject of appeals to meaning.² But by accepting ambiguity and synonymy as among the basic data of linguistics, Chomsky opened a door for semantics. Subsequently, Chomsky's disaffected pupils in the generative semantics school went a stage further in taking semantics to be base for their linguistic theories. But once meaning has been admitted to a central place in language, it is notoriously difficult to exclude the way meaning varies from context to context, and so semantics spills over into pragmatics. In no time the generative semanticists found they had bitten off more than they could chew. There is a justifiable tendency in scientific thought to assume that an existing theory or paradigm works until it is shown to fail. On this basis, the generative semanticists tried to apply the paradigm of generative grammar

to problems – such as the treatment of presuppositions and of illocutionary force – which most people would now regard as involving pragmatics. The attempt failed: not in the spectacular way in which theories are supposed to fail on account of a crucial falsifying observation, but in the way in which things tend to happen in linguistics, through a slowly accumulating weight of adverse arguments.³

I should explain that I am using the term PARADIGM roughly in Kuhn's sense, not as a synonym for 'theory', but as a more general term referring to the set of background assumptions which one makes about the nature and limits of one's subject-matter, the method of studying it, and what counts as evidence, and which determines the form that theories take.⁴ For example, the paradigm term 'generative grammar' in practice refers to a whole set of theories which share certain assumptions: that language is a mental phenomenon, that it can be studied through the algorithmic specifications of rules operating according to certain conventions, that the data for such theories are available through intuition, that languages consist of sets of sentences, etc.

While the generative semanticists were exploring the outer limits of this paradigm in semantics and pragmatics, Chomsky himself, with others of similar views, was interested in a narrower definition of the scope of this paradigm, that of the so-called Extended Standard Theory, which then evolved into a narrower Revised Extended Standard Theory. These versions of generative grammar have maintained the centrality of syntax; semantics has been relegated to a peripheral position in the model, and has to some extent been abandoned altogether.⁵ Pragmatics does not enter into the model at all, and indeed Chomsky has strongly maintained the independence of a grammar, as a theory of a 'mental organ' or 'mental faculty', from consideration of the use and functions of language.⁶

This more limited definition of the scope of linguistic theory is, in Chomsky's own terminology, a 'competence' theory rather than a 'performance' theory. It has the advantage of maintaining the integrity of linguistics, as within a walled city, away from contaminating influences of use and context. But many have grave doubts about the narrowness of this paradigm's definition of language, and about the high degree of abstraction and idealization of data which it requires.

One result of this limitation of generative grammar to a strict formalism is that, since about 1970, it has been progressively losing its position as the dominant paradigm of linguistics. More and more linguists have found their imagination and intellect en-

gaged by approaches more wide-ranging than those allowed for in generative grammar. These approaches do not yet add up to an integrated paradigm for research, but they have had the effect collectively of undermining the paradigm of Chomsky. Sociolinguistics has entailed a rejection of Chomsky's abstraction of the 'ideal native speaker/hearer'. Psycholinguistics and artificial intelligence place emphasis on a 'process' model of human language abilities, at the expense of Chomsky's disassociation of linguistic theory from psychological process. Text linguistics and discourse analysis have refused to accept the limitation of linguistics to sentence grammar. Conversational analysis has stressed the primacy of the social dimension of language study. To these developments may be added the attention that pragmatics – the main subject of this book – has given to meaning in use, rather than meaning in the abstract.

Cumulatively these approaches, and others, have led to a remarkable shift of direction within linguistics away from 'competence' and towards 'performance'. This shift is welcome from many points of view, but the resulting pluralism has meant that no comprehensive paradigm has yet emerged as a successor to generative grammar. A unified account of what language is has, I believe, been lost. Hence the purpose of this book is to argue in favour of a fresh paradigm. This does not mean that the ideas I shall present are highly original: paradigms emerge over a period and decay over a period, and the ideas put forward here have seemed to me to be 'in the air' in a way which makes it difficult to pin down their origin in particular authors.⁷ Neither will this book attempt an overall account of language: instead, it will concentrate on arguing the validity of a particular view of the distinction between grammar and pragmatics. This argument, however, will have fundamental implications for the way one looks at language. In essence, the claim will be that grammar (the abstract formal system of language) and pragmatics (the principles of language use) are complementary domains within linguistics. We cannot understand the nature of language without studying both these domains, and the interaction between them. The consequences of this view include an affirmation of the centrality of formal linguistics in the sense of Chomsky's 'competence', but a recognition that this must be fitted into, and made answerable to, a more comprehensive framework which combines functional with formal explanations.

At this point, I shall merely state the major postulates of this 'formal-functional' paradigm. In the next chapter I shall examine them and argue their *prima-facie* plausibility; in the remaining

chapters, I shall try to justify them in more detail through analysis of particular descriptive problems. The postulates are:

- P1: The semantic representation (or logical form) of a sentence is distinct from its pragmatic interpretation.
- P2: Semantics is rule-governed (= grammatical); general pragmatics is principle-controlled (= rhetorical).
- P3: The rules of grammar are fundamentally conventional; the principles of general pragmatics are fundamentally non-conventional, *ie* motivated in terms of conversational goals.
- P4: General pragmatics relates the sense (or grammatical meaning) of an utterance to its pragmatic (or illocutionary) force. This relationship may be relatively direct or indirect.
- P5: Grammatical correspondences are defined by mappings; pragmatic correspondences are defined by problems and their solutions.
- P6: Grammatical explanations are primarily formal; pragmatic explanations are primarily functional.
- P7: Grammar is ideational; pragmatics is interpersonal and textual.
- P8: In general, grammar is describable in terms of discrete and determinate categories; pragmatics is describable in terms of continuous and indeterminate values.

The effect of these postulates is to define two separate domains, and two separate paradigms of research, making up a single 'complex' paradigm for linguistics. Arguments in favour of this paradigm are based on the simplicity and naturalness of the explanations it offers. There is no clear way of testing the validity of scientific paradigms: they exist on a more abstract plane than the scientific method which Popper described as 'the method of bold conjectures and ingenious and severe attempts to refute them'. Nevertheless, by exploring, formulating, and refining paradigms of research, we are determining the background assumptions on which the search for truth about language will proceed with increased understanding.

1.2 Semantics and pragmatics

In practice, the problem of distinguishing 'language' (*langue*) and 'language use' (*parole*) has centred on a boundary dispute between semantics and pragmatics. Both fields are concerned with meaning, but the difference between them can be traced to two different uses of the verb *to mean*:

[1] What does *X* mean?

[2] What did you mean by *X*?

Semantics traditionally deals with meaning as a dyadic relation, as in [1], while pragmatics deals with meaning as a triadic relation, as in [2]. Thus meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or user of the language, whereas meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of expressions in a given language, in abstraction from particular situations, speakers, or hearers. This is a rough-and-ready distinction which has been refined, for particular purposes, by philosophers such as Morris (1938, 1946) or Carnap (1942).⁸ I shall redefine pragmatics for the purposes of linguistics, as the study of meaning in relation to speech situations (see 1.4 below).

The view that semantics and pragmatics are distinct, though complementary and interrelated fields of study, is easy to appreciate subjectively, but is more difficult to justify in an objective way. It is best supported negatively, by pointing out the failures or weaknesses of alternative views. Logically, two clear alternatives are possible: it may be claimed that the uses of meaning shown in [1] and [2] are both the concern of semantics; or that they are both the concern of pragmatics. The three views I have now mentioned may be diagrammed and labelled as shown in Fig. 1.1.

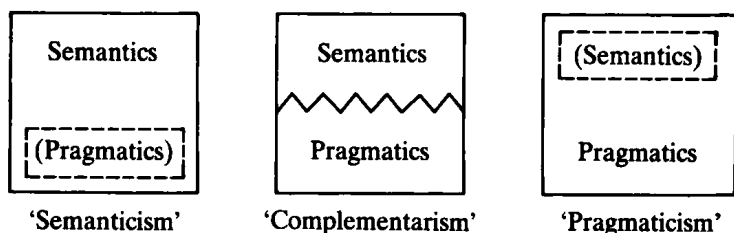


FIGURE 1.1

Because of difficulties of terminology and definition, it is hard to pin down clear cases of semanticism and pragmaticism. In practice, one notices a preference of a semantic type of explanation to a pragmatic one, or vice versa. In a modified sense, therefore, the labels 'semanticist' and 'pragmaticist' may be applied to those who assimilate as much of the study of meaning to one position as possible.

Examples of each position are the following. In the philosophy of language, there has been an influential tradition of philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, Austin, Alston, and Searle, who have been sceptical of traditional approaches to meaning in terms

of abstract mental entities such as concepts, and who have in one way or another assimilated semantics to pragmatics. For example, Searle (1969:17) argues for an approach which views the theory of meaning (and in fact the whole of language) as a sub-part of a theory of action; thus meaning is defined in terms of what speech acts speakers perform relative to hearers. On the other hand, in generative semantics in the earlier 1970s, there was an effort to assimilate pragmatics to semantics, particularly by arguing for the PERFORMATIVE HYPOTHESIS (Ross 1970), in terms of which a sentence, in its deep structure or semantic representation, is a performative sentence such as *I state to you that X, I order you to Y*. In this way, the illocutionary or pragmatic force of an utterance was encapsulated in its semantic structure.⁹

The two opposed positions of Searle (1969) and Ross (1970) appear to be very close together, because of the significance they both attach to performative sentences (see 8.2, 8.6). But in fact, they are at opposite poles, as one can see by reading Searle's critique of the performative hypothesis (Searle 1979:162-79). The contrast can also be studied in two contrasting approaches to indirect illocutions such as *Can you pass the salt*: the approach taken by Searle (1979 [1975b]:30-57), and that taken by Sadock (1974, esp. 73-95).

The third viewpoint, that of complementarism, is the one I shall support. The arguments for this position will take the following form. Any account of meaning in language must (a) be faithful to the facts as we observe them, and (b) must be as simple and generalizable as possible. If we approach meaning entirely from a pragmatic point of view, or entirely from a semantic point of view, these requirements are not met; however, if we approach meaning from a point of view which combines semantics and pragmatics, the result can be a satisfactory explanation in terms of these two criteria.

1.2.1 An example: the Cooperative Principle of Grice

My argument will be in favour of the study of pragmatics by means of CONVERSATIONAL PRINCIPLES of the kind illustrated by H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975:45-6). I shall want to introduce into pragmatics not only a Cooperative Principle (CP), but other principles, such as a Politeness Principle (PP).¹⁰ The interaction between these two principles, the CP and the PP, will in fact be one of the major concerns of this book, particularly in Chapters 4-7.

The CP has been often quoted and discussed in the past few years, but since it will be an important starting-point for the argu-