

Pragmatic Impairment

Michael Perkins

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Pragmatic Impairment

Pragmatics – the way we interact using more than just language – is particularly problematic for people with communication disorders. Through an extensive analysis of how pragmatics can go wrong, this book not only provides a novel and clinically useful account of pragmatic impairment, but it also throws new light on how pragmatics functions in healthy individuals. The aim of this book is to bring mainstream and clinical pragmatics together by showing that, not only can our understanding of pragmatics be aided by the study of pragmatic impairment, but that clinical and theoretical pragmatics are better served by treating pragmatic ability and disability within a single framework. It is the first book on this topic to be aimed primarily at linguists and psycholinguists rather than clinicians, and includes illustrative material on conditions such as autism and aphasia and a wide range of other communication disorders in both children and adults.

MICHAEL PERKINS is Professor of Clinical Linguistics in the Department of Human Communication Sciences at the University of Sheffield.

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Transcription conventions

[p ^h]	Phonetic transcription
/p/	Phonemic transcription
(.)	Very short pause
.	Short pause
-	Longer pause
(3.0)	Pause length in seconds
'	Stressed syllable
ˋ	Falling tone
ˊ	Rising tone
ˆ	Rising-falling tone
ˌ	Falling-rising tone
↑↓	Marked rise or fall in pitch
[text]	Text enclosed in square brackets on consecutive lines of a transcript denotes overlapping talk
◦ ◦	Text between degree signs is quieter than surrounding talk
—	Underlining indicates emphasis
(--)	Dashes in parentheses denote unintelligible syllables
↑↑	Text between up arrows is higher in pitch than surrounding talk
::	Colons indicate that a sound is prolonged

Phonetic symbols are from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA, 2005).

Tables

2.1 Main category groups of three pragmatic impairment checklists	<i>Page</i> 12
2.2 Discourse analytic studies of communication impairment	22
4.1 Some semiotic, cognitive and sensorimotor elements of pragmatics	63
4.2 Interpersonal compensation for expressive and receptive communication impairments	68
5.1 The effect of short-term memory problems on sentence repetition (1)	93
5.2 The effect of short-term memory problems on sentence repetition (2)	94
5.3 The emotion–attitude continuum	100
6.1 A classification scheme for pragmatic impairment	108
6.2 Example of a reduced phonological system	109
6.3 Performance of a man with aphasia on lexical production tasks	125
8.1 Sample performance on a comprehension test of reversible passives	158
8.2 Sample performance on a test of sentence formulation	158
8.3 Sample performance on a test of word structure production	159
8.4 Sample performance on a test of social reasoning	161
8.5 Sample performance on a test of reading accuracy	161
8.6 Performance on a test of auditory selective attention aged 13;9	163
8.7 Performance on a test of auditory memory aged 13;9	164
8.8 Performance on a test of auditory and visual sequential memory aged 13;9	164
8.9 Sample performance on tests of syntactic processing	164

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>Page</i> ix
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Transcription conventions</i>	xii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Aims	1
1.2 Influences	3
1.3 Outline	4
2 Pragmatic theory and pragmatic impairment	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Defining pragmatic ability and disability	9
2.2.1 Linguistic vs non-linguistic pragmatics	9
2.2.2 Normal vs abnormal pragmatic behaviour	10
2.2.3 Neurological, cognitive and behavioural perspectives	13
2.3 The clinical application of pragmatic theories and analytical methods	14
2.3.1 Speech Act Theory	15
2.3.2 Conversational Implicature	17
2.3.3 Relevance Theory	19
2.3.4 Discourse Analysis	21
2.3.5 Conversation Analysis	27
2.4 The need for a holistic approach	30
3 Pragmatics and modularity: components, dissociations and associations	33
3.1 Introduction	33
3.2 Modularity	34
3.3 Modularity and pragmatics	36
3.4 Modular dysfunction vs central capacity overload	37
3.5 Impairments attributed to modular dysfunction	38
3.6 Impairments attributed to central capacity limitations	41
3.7 Background to an interactive emergentist pragmatics	44
3.7.1 Emergence	45

3.7.2	The Competition Model	46
3.7.3	Neuroconstructivism	47
3.7.4	Joint Action Theory	48
3.8	Conclusion	50
4	Pragmatic ability and disability: an emergentist model	51
4.1	Introduction	51
4.2	Three atypical cases of pragmatic impairment	52
4.2.1	Len	52
4.2.2	Lucy	53
4.2.3	Peter	54
4.2.4	Summary and preview	55
4.3	The scope of pragmatic ability and disability	56
4.3.1	Pragmatics as choices	57
4.3.2	Pragmatics as choices at all levels of language	58
4.3.3	Pragmatics as choices across semiotic systems and modalities	58
4.3.4	Pragmatics as choices motivated by interpersonal communication	60
4.3.5	Pragmatic impairment as compensatory adaptation	61
4.4	Elements, interactions and domains	62
4.4.1	Elements: semiotic, cognitive and sensorimotor systems	62
4.4.2	Interactions: equilibrium, disequilibrium and compensatory adaptation	64
4.4.3	Domains: the intrapersonal and interpersonal	66
4.5	Conclusion	68
5	Cognition and pragmatics	70
5.1	Introduction	70
5.2	Inference	72
5.2.1	Introduction	72
5.2.2	Impairment of inferential reasoning and its pragmatic consequences	74
5.2.3	Inference: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	74
5.2.4	Inference: interactions in the interpersonal domain	75
5.3	Theory of mind	76
5.3.1	Introduction	76
5.3.2	Impairment of theory of mind and its pragmatic consequences	79
5.3.3	Theory of mind: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	80
5.3.4	Theory of mind: interactions in the interpersonal domain	81
5.4	Executive function	82
5.4.1	Introduction	82
5.4.2	Impairment of executive function and its pragmatic consequences	85
5.4.3	Executive function: interactions in the interpersonal domain	87
5.5	Memory	90
5.5.1	Introduction	90
5.5.2	Memory impairment and its pragmatic consequences	93

Contents	vii
5.5.3 Memory: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	97
5.5.4 Memory: interactions in the interpersonal domain	98
5.6 Emotion and attitude	99
5.6.1 Introduction	99
5.6.2 Impairment of emotion and attitude and its pragmatic consequences	102
5.6.3 Emotion and attitude: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	104
5.6.4 Emotion and attitude: interactions in the interpersonal domain	105
5.7 Conclusion	106
6 Language and pragmatics	107
6.1 Introduction	107
6.2 Phonology and prosody	109
6.2.1 Introduction	109
6.2.2 Phonological and prosodic impairment and their pragmatic consequences	112
6.2.3 Phonology and prosody: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	113
6.2.4 Phonology and prosody: interactions in the interpersonal domain	116
6.3 Syntax and morphology	117
6.3.1 Introduction	117
6.3.2 Grammatical impairment and its pragmatic consequences	119
6.3.3 Syntax and morphology: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	120
6.3.4 Syntax and morphology: interactions in the interpersonal domain	122
6.4 Semantics	123
6.4.1 Introduction	123
6.4.2 Semantic impairment and its pragmatic consequences	127
6.4.3 Semantics: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	128
6.4.4 Semantics: interactions in the interpersonal domain	129
6.5 Discourse	131
6.5.1 Introduction	131
6.5.2 Discourse: interactions in the intrapersonal domain	134
6.5.3 Discourse: interactions in the interpersonal domain	136
6.6 Conclusion	138
7 Sensorimotor systems and pragmatics	139
7.1 Introduction	139
7.2 Hearing	140
7.3 Vision	141
7.4 Motor ability	143
7.5 Conclusion	145

8	Compensatory adaptation	146
8.1	Introduction	146
8.2	Definition of terms	147
8.3	Brain plasticity: the neurology of intrapersonal compensation	149
8.4	Intrapersonal and interpersonal compensation	151
8.5	Case study	155
8.5.1	Background	156
8.5.2	Language	157
8.5.3	Cognition	162
8.5.4	Intrapersonal interactions and compensatory adaptations	165
8.5.5	Interpersonal interactions and compensatory adaptations	171
8.6	Conclusion	175
9	Conclusions	176
9.1	Issues for pragmatics and pragmatic theory	176
9.1.1	Scope	176
9.1.2	Multimodality	177
9.1.3	Causation as explanation	178
9.1.4	Intrapersonal and interpersonal synergy	178
9.1.5	Pragmatic ability and disability	179
9.2	Issues for clinical practice	179
9.2.1	Terminology	179
9.2.2	The multiple causes of pragmatic impairment	180
9.2.3	Intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives	181
9.2.4	The centrality of compensatory adaptation	181
	<i>Appendix</i>	183
	<i>References</i>	184
	<i>Index</i>	227

Figures

2.1 The response of a child with autism to the request 'write the days of the week in these seven boxes'	<i>Page</i> 20
2.2 Narrative picture sequence	24
2.3 A child's incorrect attempt to arrange a series of pictures to tell a story	24
2.4 Corrected picture sequence	25
2.5 Cohesion without coherence in the conversation of a man with traumatic brain injury	26
8.1 Replication of a block design	163

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims

This book aims to identify areas of common ground between pragmatics, pragmatic impairment, language, cognition and communication. It is unusual in that it accords equal weight to each, and focuses on the synergy between them.

Apart from recent interest in ‘mind-reading’ problems in autism by some practitioners of mainstream pragmatics (e.g. Wilson, 2005), the nature of pragmatic impairment and therefore its potential significance for pragmatics generally is largely unknown outside clinical circles. The few books published on pragmatic impairment (e.g. Gallagher, 1991; Leinonen, Letts and Smith, 2000; McTear and Conti-Ramsden, 1992; Müller, 2000; Smith and Leinonen, 1992) are written primarily for clinicians and for the most part aim to show how various pragmatic theories and analytical frameworks may be applied in the description, assessment and treatment of communication disorders. Furthermore, although generally excellent in meeting their stated clinical aims, their focus tends to be rather narrow – for example, concentrating exclusively on developmental disorders. In addition, because their primary interest is in application rather than theory, they also tend to be both eclectic and uncritical with regard to the pragmatic theories they make use of. The lack of two-way traffic between pragmatic theory and clinical practice is perhaps surprising given the growing number of researchers in areas such as syntax and semantics who regularly take into account language pathologies in their attempts to understand normal language processing and to evaluate linguistic theories. But it remains the case that hardly any journal articles – let alone books – have so far considered how pragmatic impairment may inform our understanding of pragmatic theory and normal language use. This is one motivation for the current book. Another is the large number of years spent by the author attempting to analyse conversations involving people with a wide range of so-called pragmatic impairments, but generally – it must be admitted – with varying levels of success. Labelling a stretch of discourse using categories derived

from various pragmatic theories is not particularly difficult, but what it provides is a description rather than an explanation. These motivations are addressed by the first three aims of the book, which are:

- Aim 1: to show how our understanding of pragmatics and pragmatic theory can be informed and extended by the study of pragmatic impairment
- Aim 2: to evaluate a range of pragmatic theories and analytical methods in terms of how well they account for pragmatic impairments
- Aim 3: to provide a model of pragmatics which is applicable to pragmatic ability and disability alike, and which affords a sense of explanation rather than mere description.

The sense of explanation referred to in Aim 3 stems partly from identifying the capacities and processes which underlie pragmatic behaviour. This is no easy task, and also depends on how pragmatics is defined. In the opening paragraph of a recent encyclopedia article on pragmatics, Sperber and Wilson (2005: 468) define the term in its 'broad' sense as covering 'a range of loosely related research programmes from formal studies of deictic expressions to sociological studies of ethnic verbal stereotypes', before proceeding to focus exclusively on one sense of the term. The rationale for their specific focus – namely, 'the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances' – is that it has 'been of interest to linguists and philosophers of language in the past thirty years or so'. This is absolutely justified in an encyclopedia article aimed at philosophers, but at the same time reflects the ease with which issues deemed extraneous (for whatever reason) to one's particular concerns can be ignored. The particular focus used in this book derives from an extensive analysis of how pragmatics may be impaired, following the maxim that we only become truly aware of the nature of a mechanism or process by examining what happens when it goes wrong. The underlying capacities which appear to be involved in pragmatic breakdown are reflected in Aim 4:

- Aim 4: to examine in detail the role of cognition, language and sensorimotor systems in pragmatic processing.

This engenders rather a broad interpretation of pragmatics, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Nonetheless, unlike the 'range of loosely related research programmes' referred to above by Sperber and Wilson, the broad view of pragmatics covered in this book aims to be holistic while at the same time being principled and coherent. Meeting Aim 4 entails a further aim:

- Aim 5: to compare modular and interactional approaches to pragmatics.

While respecting and incorporating the achievements of research on communication and communication impairment carried out within a modular

paradigm, the emphasis of this book is on the interaction and co-dependency of the constituents of cognition, language, sensory input and motor output, rather than on their dissociation and discreteness. This is partly motivated by the specific focus of pragmatics on communication between individuals and, as we shall see, by the way in which language and cognition can be seen as interpersonal phenomena, extending beyond the individual. Aim 6 is a significant by-product of Aims 1–5:

Aim 6: to illustrate the nature of pragmatic impairments using a wide range of material from both developmental and acquired communication disorders (e.g. autistic spectrum disorder, specific language impairment, Williams syndrome, Down's syndrome, aphasia, traumatic brain injury, right hemisphere brain damage).

Handbooks and encyclopedias apart, it is rare to find a comprehensive range of impairments targeted in works on communication disorder and speech and language pathology. Because of this, interesting parallels and similarities and evidence of wider principles at work are sometimes missed.

1.2 Influences

To provide a flavour of where the book is coming from, and to allow readers to form an impression of what they're letting themselves in for, I would like to briefly – but gratefully – acknowledge what I see as its main intellectual antecedents and influences. One of the greatest of these has been the interactive – or what one might call the 'melting-pot' – approach of Elizabeth Bates, whose work spans not only pragmatics but also language development, psycholinguistics, cross-linguistic perspectives, developmental and adult acquired language disorders and much else besides. Bates was not too keen on the notion of pragmatics as a narrow concept and tended to avoid the term. She writes that '[w]ithin the interactive camp, pragmatics is not viewed as a single domain at all. Instead, it can be viewed as the *cause* of linguistic structure, the set of communicative pressures under which all the other linguistic levels have evolved' (Bates, 2003: 262). While similar in breadth and spirit, my own approach focuses on causation in the opposite direction, taking the stance that pragmatics may be seen as the emergent outcome of interactions between cognition, language and sensorimotor systems within and between individuals as motivated by the requirements of interpersonal communication. A related influence is the work of Annette Karmiloff-Smith (e.g. Karmiloff-Smith, 1998), whose 'neuroconstructivist' account of developmental communication disorders puts compensatory adaptation at the heart of the developmental process. Her specific focus is on cognitive neuropsychology – i.e.

the internal ecosystem of the individual. In my own approach – let us call it ‘emergentist pragmatics’ – the ecosystem within which compensation operates is expanded to encompass the interpersonal domain. This extension of compensation from the intrapersonal into the interpersonal is inspired by the work of cognitive scientists such as Andy Clark (e.g. Clark, 1997), whose conception of emergence and of distributed cognition I have found particularly convincing. A further powerful influence at the interpersonal level has been Conversation Analysis (CA), particularly the work of Emanuel Schegloff, Charles Goodwin and others (e.g. Goodwin, 1995; Schegloff, 2003) who have used CA to analyse interactions involving people with communication impairments, and who tend to see manifestations of the impairment as evidence of interactive solutions to underlying problems, rather than as primary deficits *per se*. A related influence is the work of Herb Clark (e.g. Clark, 1996), whose ‘joint action theory’ – a blend of CA, social psychology and reworked elements of Austin’s original version of Speech Act Theory – sees communicative interaction between individuals as indivisibly conjoint, rather than being reducible to the sum of their separate contributions. A further interwoven strand is the view of Charles Goodwin and others (e.g. Goodwin, 2000a) – also taken on board by Clark – that interpersonal communication is inextricably multimodal – i.e. that separate symbolic systems such as language, gesture and facial expression fuse together into a semiotic whole during communication. Finally, although it a) is much narrower in scope, b) sees theory of mind as the sole cognitive determinant of pragmatics and c) emphasizes the perspective of the hearer over that of the speaker, I have found Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) an impressive account of the way in which shifting focus from pragmatics as behaviour to its cognitive foundations affords a strong sense of explanation.

1.3 Outline

The main points covered in the book are summarized below.

Perhaps inevitably, though necessarily, Chapter 2 begins with terminology. For example, it appears that linguists and language pathologists tend to make rather different assumptions about the link between pragmatics and language. To accommodate both views, a semiotic definition of pragmatics is adopted. A survey of how a range of theories and analytical frameworks has been applied in the analysis of pragmatic impairment shows that they are generally more effective at description than explanation. It is concluded that, in order to provide an account of pragmatic ability and disability adequate for the needs of clinicians (which turn out to

be far more extensive and exacting than those of linguists), a holistic account is required which is able to explain the underlying causes of pragmatic impairment in addition to its behavioural symptoms. Because of its greater comprehensiveness, such an account should also be of help in explaining normal pragmatic behaviour too.

Chapter 3 considers to what extent pragmatics may be seen either as a discrete level of language or as a mental module. Evidence is provided from a wide range of communication impairments which suggests that the modular status of various linguistic and cognitive systems which contribute to pragmatic behaviour is far from unequivocal. This is partly a function of the difference between analytical methods which aim to identify dissociations between putative modular entities, and others which focus on associations and interactions. Because pragmatics, broadly defined, appears to be implicated in the entire range of communication impairments whatever their etiology, it is concluded that it may be more helpful – at least heuristically – to see it as the emergent product of the way cognitive and linguistic processes interact, rather than as a primary modular entity.

Chapter 4 presents an emergentist model of typical and atypical pragmatic functioning, and shows that pragmatic disruption is an inescapable corollary even of communication disorders not normally seen as paradigm cases of pragmatic impairment. The notion of choice is at the heart of the model, which includes not just linguistic choice but choice across the entire range of semiotic systems together with their input and output modalities. Pragmatics is defined as the emergent consequence of interactions between cognitive, semiotic and sensorimotor systems within, and between, communicating individuals. In accounting for pragmatic ability and disability, the burden of explanation thus shifts from the communicative behaviour itself to the constitutive elements and interactions from which it emerges. These are examined in Chapters 5–8.

Chapter 5 considers the role played by inference, theory of mind, executive function, memory, emotion and attitude in pragmatics and pragmatic impairment. Each of these areas of cognition is scrutinized in terms of how its impairment affects pragmatic performance by restricting communicative choice, and how it interacts with semiotic, sensorimotor and other cognitive elements both intrapersonally (i.e. within a single individual) and interpersonally (i.e. between communicating individuals). It is concluded that pragmatics is not exclusively linked to any single cognitive process, but typically draws on multiple areas of cognition. Furthermore, there is considerable interaction and co-dependency between the various separate cognitive systems, and there are good grounds for seeing each system as the emergent product of subsidiary interactions.