

Pragmatic Meaning

and Cognition

Sophia S. A. Marmaridou



PRAGMATIC MEANING AND COGNITION

SOPHIA S.A. MARMARIDOU

University of Athens

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72

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Pragmatic Meaning and Cognition

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Theoretical Perspectives on Pragmatic Meaning	13
1.1 Introduction	13
1.2 The philosophical perspective	15
1.3 The cognitive pragmatics perspective	25
1.4 The societal perspective	32
1.5 Conclusions	38
2 Towards an Experiential Approach to Pragmatic Meaning	42
2.1 Introduction	42
2.2 The objectivist paradigm in the study of linguistic meaning: the semantics-pragmatics dichotomy	43
2.3 On experiential realism	47
2.3.1 The experiential perspective on reasoning and internalization	55
2.3.1.1 Reasoning	55
2.3.1.2 The issue of internalization	57
2.3.2 An experiential definition of pragmatics and pragmatic meaning	60
2.4 Conclusions	63
3 On deixis	65
3.1 Introduction	65
3.2 A descriptive analysis of deixis	68
3.2.1 Some properties of deixis	69

3.2.2	Deictic categories	74
3.2.2.1	Person and social deixis	74
3.2.2.2	Time deixis	82
3.2.2.3	Place deixis	86
3.2.2.4	Discourse deixis	93
3.3	An experiential approach to deixis	96
3.3.1	The cognitive basis of deixis	98
3.3.1.1	The ICM of deixis	98
3.3.1.2	An account of problems in the analysis of deixis	104
3.4	Conclusions	115
4	On presupposition	117
4.1	Introduction	117
4.2	Presuppositional phenomena and problems	119
4.2.1	Traditional approaches to presupposition	120
4.2.2	Defeasibility and the projection problem: towards a pragmatic account	125
4.2.2.1	Defeasibility	125
4.2.2.2	The projection problem	127
4.2.3	Some theoretical considerations	132
4.2.3.1	The semantic approach	133
4.2.3.2	The pragmatic approach	136
4.2.4	Towards a unified treatment of presupposition	140
4.3	An experiential approach to presupposition	141
4.3.1	Presupposition-triggering ICMs	142
4.3.2	Mental spaces and the construction of realities	149
4.4	Conclusions	161
5	On Speech Acts	163
5.1	Introduction	163
5.2	Speech act theory	167
5.2.1	Origins of speech act theory	168
5.2.2	Development of speech act theory	180
5.3	Issues and problems in speech act theory	186
5.3.1	The performative hypothesis	187
5.3.2	Conventionality and intentionality	189
5.3.3	Criticisms of classical speech act theory	193
5.3.4	The interactive character of speech acts and cognition	200
5.4	An experiential approach to speech acts	207

5.4.1	The ICM of speech acts	209
5.4.2	The prototypicality scale of speech acts	215
5.5	Conclusions	221
6	On Implicature	223
6.1	Introduction	223
6.2	Grice's theory of communication and implicature	226
6.3	Issues and criticisms of the theory of implicature	237
6.4	Developments in the analysis of implicature	241
6.4.1	The relevance theoretic approach	242
6.4.2	The neo-Gricean approach	246
6.5	An experiential approach to inferences and communication	248
6.5.1	The experiential grounding of inferences	249
6.5.2	Cognitive models of communication and inferences	261
6.6	Conclusions	271
	Conclusions	273
	<i>Notes</i>	281
	<i>References</i>	288
	<i>Subject Index</i>	311
	<i>Name Index</i>	318

Introduction

In the last thirty five years we have witnessed a growing interest in pragmatics, a field of study which is concerned with the analysis of language use. Apart from an already vast literature, this interest has significantly manifested itself in the establishment of an International Pragmatics Association and the circulation of two academic serial publications specifically devoted to the study of pragmatic issues, namely *Pragmatics* and the *Journal of Pragmatics*. Moreover, the development of this field of study has led to the formation of a number of distinct tendencies in it ranging from philosophical pragmatics (see Austin 1962, Searle 1969 and Grice 1975), to radical and neo-Gricean pragmatics (see Cole 1981), cognitive pragmatics (see Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995 and Blakemore 1987), interactive pragmatics (see Thomas 1995), and societal pragmatics (see Mey 1993), among others. These tendencies share the same basic concern, that is, the study of meaning as it emerges in language use. However, they have developed in different directions depending on philosophical principle and methodological stance.

Among these multiple directions in pragmatics, two trends appear to have dominated the field. The one originates in the Anglo-American tradition of the philosophy of language and the other is founded on psychological theories of language, communication and cognition. This book is an attempt to synthesize important insights from the philosophical tradition concerning pragmatic phenomena, with current developments in cognitive linguistics concerning the study of linguistic meaning. The outcome of the synthesis is a new concept of pragmatic meaning which is on the one hand grounded in cognition and motivated by linguistic and cultural convention and, on the other, creates the potential for addressing the interactive and social dimensions of language use.

Philosophical pragmatics, developing as a reaction to the philosophical tradition of logical positivism, considers pragmatics as complementary to semantics. In this tradition, semantics is the study of the meaning of words and sentences in terms of their correspondence with objects and states of affairs in the world; pragmatics is the study of speaker utterances and specifically the

meaning a speaker intends to convey by her utterance. This philosophically established semantics-pragmatics dichotomy has been extremely influential in the study of language and language use. The dividing line between the two levels of analysis has often moved in the direction of the one or the other, to be finally challenged in the recently emerging philosophical framework of experiential realism, in which the present work is grounded. Radical and neo-Gricean approaches to pragmatics attempt to provide a characterization of language and language use in terms of its syntax and pragmatics, allocating to semantics a very restricted portion of linguistic meaning. To achieve this aim they have sought to provide rigorous formalizations of pragmatic phenomena by resorting to the tools and methodology of formal logic, while at the same time focusing on the structure of different languages. Cognitive pragmatics focuses on the mental processing of information for communicative purposes and is explicitly restricted to an isolated aspect of cognition considered responsible for pragmatic phenomena. In this approach, the linguistic medium is simply a constraining factor in achieving communicative goals. Incidentally, this is in line with corresponding developments in formal syntax, in which the specification of rules has given way to the placement of constraints on the form of the sentences of a language. Interactive pragmatics is essentially concerned with dynamic aspects of language use and, in particular, the negotiable character of interlocutors' utterances during communicative exchanges. Finally, societal pragmatics focuses on language users and their conditions of language use, making crucial reference to the societal context in which language is used to create, maintain, or change power relations between interlocutors.

Despite their different orientations, the above approaches to pragmatics explicitly or implicitly regard language as a human faculty which is independent from the rest of cognition, also involving perception, motor movement and image formation. They are also based on the view that language is a symbolic representation of objectively existing reality. It is assumed that, when language is used, interlocutors manipulate this symbolic system so as to express and understand meanings and intentions which go beyond the objectively established correspondence between the world and language, that is, beyond the meaning of words and sentences. In this context, deixis, presupposition, speech acts, and conversational implicature have been considered central manifestations of speaker meaning and have been extensively analyzed and discussed in the philosophical literature. Significantly, these pragmatic phenomena have also been addressed mainly from two perspectives, the cognitive-pragmatic and the societal, that cut across various tendencies in pragmatic study. Both perspectives originate in the philosophy of language. However, whereas the cognitive-pragmatic perspective focuses on the interlocutors' mental processing abilities in terms of

which they can create and understand meanings beyond the word and sentence levels, the societal perspective attempts to define those social parameters that affect the production and understanding of utterances. In this sense, the former places language use in an internal relation to interlocutors, whereas the latter in an external relation. As a result, the cognitive perspective views the social parameters of a speech event as a type of external information to be processed by the human mind so that utterances are properly understood. It does not assign them an internal status in that it does not consider them as part of cognitive structure. The societal perspective seeks to identify the social structures that not only affect, but actually constitute the speech events in which language is used and social meanings are created and reproduced. Being an externalist perspective, it does not assign such structures an internal status either. Moreover, since social structures are external, an 'interface' level of social representations in the mind is often invoked to account for the understanding and reproduction of such structures by social agents (van Dijk 1994).

The consideration and critical evaluation of such diverse perspectives on pragmatic phenomena makes it sufficiently clear that language use is indisputably both an internal and an external phenomenon. For this reason, an alternative proposal is made in this book concerning language use and the investigation of cognitive and social aspects of pragmatic meaning. This proposal, to be explored in subsequent chapters, is based on the following hypothesis: if language is grounded in cognition and develops in society, then cognitive structure and conceptualizations of social reality must characterize language use, which thus contributes to the production, maintenance or change of social meaning. In this sense, social meaning is construed in terms of internal cognitive structure directly, rather than in terms of internal mental representations of external formations and structures. On the assumption that such cognitive structures develop in response to the individual's interaction with her physical and social environment, they are also adaptable and hence motivate rather than determine social meaning. The interactive and adaptable character of these cognitive structures on the one hand allows for universalist claims, since all human beings can develop them and, on the other, allows for considerations of sociocultural relativity and linguistic diversity in ways that will be suggested but not fully explored within the boundaries of this book.

The attempt to pursue this line of investigation in the present work leads to a new synthesis of earlier philosophical, cognitive and societal approaches to pragmatic meaning within an alternative theoretical framework, that of cognitive linguistics and experiential realism. In this context, deixis, presupposition, speech acts and implicature have been selected as manifestations of pragmatic meaning whose study constitutes the domain of pragmatic investigation in the

Anglo-American philosophical tradition. Their choice does not imply their primacy over other topics of pragmatic investigation such as conversational structure, the role of discourse markers in understanding utterances, or the study of style. Nor does it reflect a component view of pragmatics, as a layer of analysis above semantics, for example. Rather, the analysis of these phenomena within an experientialist framework is intended to reveal the complex ways in which language use is motivated by cognitive structure and interacts with it. Moreover, the proposed analysis aims to highlight sociocultural parameters of pragmatic meaning, including power relations between interlocutors, institutional roles and relevant social values and cultural beliefs. To the extent that individuals internalize such parameters through their use of language, they are also constituted as social agents, thereby maintaining, reproducing, challenging or changing these parameters during interaction.

The approach to pragmatic meaning to be adopted in this book originates in a theory of linguistic meaning which is known as cognitive semantics and has established itself as an alternative philosophical trend, that of experiential realism (Lakoff 1987, Johnson 1992 and Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In contrast to other philosophical views that have affected linguistics, experiential realism views language as part of general cognition. This view is adopted in cognitive linguistics, which aims to explain how language is systematically grounded in human cognition. One of the basic principles of experiential realism and cognitive linguistics is that language is not a representation of objectively existing reality, but of reality as it is perceived and experienced by human beings. Viewed from this internalist perspective on reality (Putman 1981), linguistic meaning is embodied; it arises from our biological capacities and our physical and sociocultural experiences as beings functioning in our environment. It is accepted that concepts are metaphorically and socioculturally structured, so that social meaning develops internally to the human being in terms of particular cognitive models and processes. Linguistic form provides evidence for this kind of structure and is hence not entirely arbitrary (Bolinger 1977 and Haiman 1983).

One of the advocates of this theoretical framework, Sweetser (1990), has successfully shown how cognitive structure resolves pragmatic ambiguity and how linguistic form systematically relates to multiple language functions. More importantly, she has convincingly argued that our understanding of language use and our understanding of cognition itself are inherent underpinnings to all our use of language. We understand and talk about these two domains in terms of the external physical and social domain.

Because experiential realism views physical and social aspects of language as equally fundamental, it has encouraged attempts to work out a synthesis of

cognitive and societal parameters of language use within its framework. For example, Hawkins (1997) correlates Langacker's (1987) concept of grounding with ideology. He claims that iconographic textual reference (e.g. how an individual is portrayed in a text) is a form of experiential, deictic grounding. Through this kind of reference an individual is defined relative to a particular conventional image from a culturally based system of images. This system constitutes a cognitive iconography. Our icons are concrete symbols of our abstract ideological values. Hence, our ideology enters our conscious awareness most directly in the form of iconography, which is an instance of cognitive grounding. Ideology has also been associated with conceptual metaphor in Kitis and Milapides (1997). Adopting a critical perspective on discourse, the authors argue that the systematic use of personification metaphors is conducive to developing the ideologically grounded textual rhetoric of a news article.

Thornburg and Panther (1997) provide evidence that an indirect speech act may be performed when the speaker mentions an attribute of that act, so that the attribute metonymically stands for the act. Consistently with the cognitive linguistics paradigm, they argue that metonymic reasoning is a case of natural inference schema that affects the pragmatic domain of speech acts. At the same time they explore the possibility of reconciling pragmatics and cognitive linguistics by integrating a pragmatic phenomenon in a cognitivist framework.

Working essentially within the same theoretical framework, I attempt elsewhere (Marmaridou in prep. a) to broaden its scope by incorporating societal concerns and a reconsideration of the linguistic relativity issue. More specifically, I argue that the deployment of particular cognitive structures in an institutionally sanctioned type of text (in advertizements, for instance) contributes to the construction and maintenance of social reality and channels experience into distinct modes of thought. In this analysis, conceptual structure determines language structure, but language use, in the form of institutionalized discourse, creates culturally relevant patterns of thought. In this respect cognitive structure is the means and vehicle for the internalization of the social meaning of discourse.

The same theoretical concerns are revealed in another project focusing on financial discourse (Marmaridou 1991a, 1994 and in prep. b). It is argued that the use of conceptual metaphors in this discourse type is on the one hand partly motivated by specific grammatical constructions and, on the other, establishes a social practice that constructs financial activity in terms of dialectically articulated cultural values.

The need to work out a synthesis of cognitive and societal aspects of language use has also become apparent in the work of scholars working outside the experientialist tradition. From an interactive perspective, Thomas (1995)

sees language use as a dynamic process between speaker intentions defining speaker meaning and utterance interpretation, subject to social constraints on utterance production. Goatly (1994: 141) stresses the need to allow for both "the importance of social context and the use of inferential principles in accounting for the construction of meaning between speakers and hearers". Moreover, he proposes a synthesis of cognitive pragmatics as developed in Relevance Theory and a Hallidayan version of a genre/register theory of context by exploring metaphorical interpretations of texts. The main argument is that this combination allows both for an explanation of inferencing mechanisms and for their relatedness to social goals and purposes.

Even within Relevance Theory, an essentially mentalist approach to pragmatics, according to which the whole of communication can be explained by a single cognitive principle, that of relevance, the need to address the social dimension of language use has not gone unnoticed. Sperber and Wilson (1997) state that non-ostensive methods of maximizing relevance in communication can be socially exploited and are hence significant in maintaining or challenging power relations. Zegarac (1998a) takes issue with a predominantly social phenomenon, that of phatic communication, to argue for its characterization within the framework of Relevance Theory. He claims that the phatic use of language is a means of achieving a range of social goals through establishing, maintaining and managing cognitive environments. In a similar vein, but in a different study, Zegarac (1998b) is concerned with the role of ostensive-inferential communication in ideological manipulation, thus clearly trying to accommodate societal concerns within a cognitivist framework.

Working in the framework of anthropological linguistics and sharing societal concerns, Duranti (1986) emphasizes the view that speech is public and intersubjective, to be explained by psychological processes in the individual that have their origin in social interaction. In this way he prioritizes the social dimension of language and makes cognitive processes dependent on it.

Among such theoretical possibilities for the investigation of cognitive and social aspects of language use, the present work explores the potential of experiential realism by addressing the issue of pragmatic meaning within its framework. It also provides an account of manifestations of this meaning by drawing on the biological and social foundations of language.

This book necessarily reflects my own interests and concerns in the area of pragmatic study. It is my hope that it will also appeal to a varied group of readers, including students, colleagues and all those who have some acquaintance with the field of linguistics or cognitive science. Those readers who only have an elementary knowledge of linguistics will be introduced to the four basic pragmatic phenomena that have been studied within the philosophical tradition

and constitute manifestations of pragmatic meaning, namely, deixis, presupposition, speech acts, and implicature. These readers will particularly benefit from the exposition to the philosophical tradition from which several trends in pragmatic study have evolved. Relevance Theory, neo-Gricean pragmatics, societal pragmatics and interactional pragmatics can best be understood and appreciated if acquaintance with philosophical pragmatics has preceded. In fact, all these trends are also focused upon to the extent that they relate to some of the topics discussed in this book. Apart from exploring philosophical and linguistic perspectives on pragmatic phenomena, readers will be introduced to basic principles of experiential realism and cognitive linguistics. The application of cognitive principles to the investigation of pragmatic meaning is further expected to broaden these readers' insights into both areas of study, namely, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics.

Readers who are well acquainted with pragmatics can also familiarize themselves with experiential realism and assess its contribution to pragmatic study. This assessment can be based on the proposed analysis, which aims to capture important aspects of the cognitive and societal grounding of pragmatic meaning. Cognitive scientists, who are more familiar with issues of mental processing and artificial intelligence, may find in this work some concrete proposals concerning the internalization of social aspects of pragmatic meaning in terms of cognitive models.

To respond to the aims of this book and the interests of a varied public is not an easy task. First of all, no approach to the analysis of pragmatic meaning can be appreciated unless the origins of pragmatics itself as a field of study are revealed. For this reason, in the first chapter the foundations of linguistic pragmatics are traced in the philosophy of language and the theory of semiotics and an attempt is made to explain how cognitive and societal approaches to pragmatics have evolved from them. More specifically it will be shown that linguistic pragmatics initially developed as a study of speaker utterances, thereby focusing on speaker intentions, the addressee's cognitive abilities in processing transmitted information, and the sociocultural context in which utterances are produced. Against this general framework, the cognitive pragmatics perspective concentrates on the mental computations of linguistic and contextual material, whereas the societal perspective involves an investigation of the institutional basis of language and the ways in which interlocutors are constituted through their discourses. As a result of their respective orientations, cognitive-pragmatic and societal approaches to pragmatics can only provide partial accounts of pragmatic meaning. It will be argued that this fact is also related to their objectivist philosophical background in which language is considered a symbolic representation of objectively existing reality. Also, it will be claimed that a non-