

Pragmatics

Communication clearly depends on not only recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance, but also recognizing what speakers mean by their utterances in a particular context. The study of what speakers mean, or “speaker meaning,” is called pragmatics.

Invisible Meaning In many ways, pragmatics is the study of “invisible” meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers (or writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provides us with some insights into how we understand more than just the linguistic content of utterances. From the perspective of pragmatics, more is always being communicated than is said.

Context

It must be the case that we use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the “meaning” of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended.

to communicate. There are different kinds of context. There is obviously the physical context, which can be the location “out there” where we encounter words and phrases (e.g. the word BANK on a wall of a building is understood as a financial institution). There is also the linguistic context, also known as co-text. The cotext of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. If the word bank is used with other words like

steep or overgrown, we have no problem deciding which type of bank is meant. Or, when someone says that she has to get to the bank to withdraw some cash, the co-text tells us which type of bank is intended.

Deixis

There are some very common words in our language that can't be interpreted at all if we don't know the context. These are words such as here and there, this or that, now or then, yesterday, today or tomorrow, as well as pronouns such as you, me, she, him, it, them. Some sentences of English are virtually impossible to understand if we don't know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. For example, what is the meaning of: You'll have to bring it back tomorrow because she isn't here today? Out of context, this sentence is really vague. It contains a large number of expressions (you, it, tomorrow, she, here, today) that rely on knowledge of the local context for their interpretation. In context, we are expected to understand that the delivery driver (you) will have to return on February 15th (tomorrow) to 660 College Drive (here) with the long box (it) labeled "flowers, handle with care" addressed to Lisa Landry (she).

Reference

In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don't refer to anything. People refer. We have to define reference as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns (Chomsky, Jennifer, Whiskas), other nouns in phrases (a writer, my friend, the cat) or pronouns (he, she, it). We sometimes assume that these words identify someone or something uniquely, but it is more accurate to say that,

for each word or phrase, there is a “range of reference.” The words Jennifer or friend or she can be used to refer to many entities in the world. As we observed earlier, an expression such as the war doesn’t directly identify anything by itself, because its reference depends on who is using it. We can also refer to things when we are not sure what to call them. We can use expressions such as the blue thing and that icky stuff and we can even invent names. For instance, there was a man who always drove his motorcycle fast and loud through my neighborhood and was locally referred to as Mr. Kawasaki. In this case, a brand name for a motorcycle is being used to refer to a person.

Inference

As in the “Mr. Kawasaki” example, a successful act of reference depends more on the listener/reader’s ability to recognize what the speaker/writer means than on the listener’s “dictionary” knowledge of a word that is used. For example, in a restaurant, one waiter can ask another, Where’s the spinach salad sitting? and receive the reply, He’s sitting by the door. If you’re studying linguistics, you might ask someone, Can I look at your Chomsky? and get the response, Sure, it’s on the shelf over there. And when you hear that Jennifer is wearing Calvin Klein, you avoid imagining someone called Calvin draped over poor Jennifer and recognize that they are talking about her clothing. These examples make it clear that we can use nouns associated with things (salad) to refer to people, and use names of people (Chomsky, Calvin Klein) to refer to things. The key process here is called inference.

An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant. In the Chomsky example, the listener has to operate with the inference: “if X is the name of the writer of a book, then X can be used to identify a copy of a book by that writer.” Similar types of inferences are necessary to understand someone who says that Picasso is in the museum, We saw Shakespeare in London, Mozart was playing in the background and The bride wore Giorgio Armani. Anaphora We usually make a distinction between how we introduce new

referents (a puppy) and how we refer back to them (the puppy, it). We saw a funny home video about a boy washing a puppy in a small bath. The puppy started struggling and shaking and the boy got really wet. When he let go, it jumped out of the bath and ran away. In this type of referential relationship, the second (or subsequent) referring expression is an example of anaphora ("referring back"). The first mention is called the antecedent. So, in our example, a boy, a puppy and a small bath are antecedents and The puppy, the boy, he, it and the bath are anaphoric expressions. There is a much less common pattern, called cataphora, which reverses the antecedent–anaphora relationship by beginning with a pronoun (It), then later revealing more specific information. This device is more common in stories, as in this beginning: It suddenly appeared on the path a little ahead of me, staring in my direction and sniffing the air. An enormous grizzly bear was checking me out. Anaphora is, however, the more common pattern and can be defined as subsequent reference to an already introduced entity. Mostly we use anaphora in texts to maintain reference. The connection between an antecedent and an anaphoric expression is created through a pronoun (it), or a phrase with the plus the antecedent noun (the puppy), or another noun that is related to the antecedent in some way (The little dog ran out of the room). The connection between antecedents and anaphoric expressions is often based on inference, as in these examples: We found a house to rent, but the kitchen was very small. I got on a bus and asked the driver if it went near the downtown area. In the first example, we must make an inference like "if X is a house, then X has a kitchen" in order to interpret the connection between antecedent a house and anaphoric expression the kitchen. In the second example, we must make an inference like "if X is a bus, then X has a driver" in order to make the connection between a bus and the driver. In some cases, the antecedent can be a verb, as in: The victim was shot twice, but the gun was never recovered. Here the inference is that any "shooting" event must involve a gun. We have used the term "inference" here to describe what the listener (or reader) does. When we talk about an assumption made by the speaker (or writer), we usually talk about a "presupposition."

Presupposition

When we use a referring expression like this, he or Jennifer, we usually assume that our listeners can recognize which referent is intended. In a more general way, we design our linguistic messages on the basis of large-scale assumptions about what our listeners already know. What a speaker (or writer) assumes is true or known by a listener (or reader) can be described as a presupposition. If someone tells you Hey, your brother is looking for you, there is an obvious presupposition that you have a brother. If you are asked the question When did you stop smoking?, there are at least two presuppositions involved: you used to smoke and you no longer do so. There is a test for presuppositions that involves comparing a sentence with its negative version and identifying which presuppositions remain true in both. This is called “constancy under negation.” Whether you say My car is a wreck or the negative My car is not a wreck, there is an underlying presupposition (I have a car) that remains true.