

Pragmatics

What is pragmatics?

"We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in the sticky strands"

Jean Aitchison

"Pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others."

David Crystal

"Pragmatics is a way of investigating how sense can be made of certain texts even when, from a semantic viewpoint, the text seems to be either incomplete or to have a different meaning to what is really intended. Consider a sign seen in a children's wear shop window: "Baby Sale - lots of bargains". We know without asking that there are no babies are for sale - that what is for sale are items used for babies. Pragmatics allows us to investigate how this "meaning beyond the words" can be understood without ambiguity. The extra meaning is there, not because of the semantic aspects of the words themselves, but because we share certain contextual knowledge with the writer or speaker of the text.

Pragmatics is an important area of study for your course. A simplified way of thinking about pragmatics is to recognise, for example, that language needs to be kept interesting - a speaker or writer does not want to bore a listener or reader, for example, by being over-long or tedious. So, humans strive to find linguistic means to make a text, perhaps, shorter, more interesting, more relevant, more purposeful or more personal. Pragmatics allows this."

Steve Campsall

We use language all the time to make things happen. We ask someone to pass the salt or marry us – not, usually at the same time. We order a pizza or make a dental appointment. Speech acts include asking for a glass of beer, promising to drink the beer, threatening to drink more beer, ordering someone else to drink some beer, and so on. Some special people can do extraordinary things with words, like baptizing a baby, declaring war, awarding a penalty kick to Arsenal FC or sentencing a convict.

Linguists have called these things "speech acts" – and developed a theory (called, unsurprisingly, speech act theory) to explain how they work. Some of this is rooted in common sense and stating the obvious – like **felicity conditions**. These explain that merely saying the words does not accomplish the act. Judges (unless they are also referees) cannot award penalty kicks to Arsenal, and football referees (unless they are also heads of state) cannot declare war.

Speech act theory is **not** the whole of pragmatics, but is perhaps currently the most important established part of the subject. Contemporary debate in pragmatics often focuses on its relations with semantics. Since semantics is the study of meaning in language, why add a new field of study to look at meaning from a novel viewpoint?

This is an elementary confusion. Clearly linguists **could** develop a model of semantics that included pragmatics. Or they could produce a model for each, which allows for some exploration and explanation of the boundary between them – but distinguishes them as in some way different kinds of activity. However, there is a consensus view that pragmatics as a separate study is necessary because it explains meanings that semantics overlooks.

What does pragmatics include?

The lack of a clear consensus appears in the way that no two published accounts list the same categories of pragmatics in quite the same order. But among the things you should know about are:

- Speech act theory
- Felicity conditions
- Conversational implicature
- The cooperative principle
- Conversational maxims
- Relevance
- Politeness
- Phatic tokens
- Deixis

This guide contains some explanation of all of these, as well as related or peripheral subjects. Many of them break down further into their own sub-categories, as with the different kinds of speech acts that linguists have usefully distinguished.

Criticisms of pragmatics

Some of the criticisms directed at pragmatics include these:

- It does not have a clear-cut focus
- Its principles are vague and fuzzy
- It is redundant – semantics already covers the territory adequately

In defending pragmatics we can say that:

- The study of speech acts has illuminated social language interactions
- It covers things that semantics (hitherto) has overlooked
- It can help inform strategies for teaching language
- It has given new insights into understanding literature
- The theory of the cooperative principle and politeness principle have provided insights into person-to-person interactions.

Speech acts

The philosopher J.L. Austin (1911-1960) claims that many utterances (things people say) are equivalent to actions. When someone says: "I name this ship" or "I now pronounce you man and wife", the utterance creates a new social or psychological reality. We can add many more examples:

- Sergeant Major: Squad, by the left... left turn!
- Referee: (Pointing to the centre circle) Goal!
- Groom: With this ring, I thee wed.

Speech act theory broadly explains these utterances as having three parts or aspects: **locutionary**, **illocutionary** and **perlocutionary** acts.

- **Locutionary acts** are simply the speech acts that have taken place.
- **Illocutionary acts** are the real actions which are performed by the utterance, where saying equals doing, as in betting, plighting one's troth, welcoming and warning.
- **Perlocutionary acts** are the effects of the utterance on the listener, who accepts the bet or pledge of marriage, is welcomed or warned.

Some linguists have attempted to classify illocutionary acts into a number of categories or types. David Crystal, quoting J.R. Searle, gives five such categories: **representatives**, **directives**, **commissives**, **expressives** and **declarations**. (Perhaps he would have preferred **declaratives**, but this term was already taken as a description of a kind of sentence that expresses a statement.)

Representatives – here the speaker asserts a proposition to be true, using such verbs as: **affirm**, **believe**, **conclude**, **deny**, **report**

Directives – here the speaker tries to make the hearer do something, with such words as: **ask**, **beg**, **challenge**, **command**, **dare**, **invite**, **insist**, **request**

Commissives – here the speaker commits himself (or herself) to a (future) course of action, with verbs such as: **guarantee**, **pledge**, **promise**, **swear**, **vow**, **undertake**

Expressives – the speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs, using such verbs as: **apologize**, **appreciate**, **congratulate**, **deplore**, **detest**, **regret**, **thank**, **welcome**

Declarations – the speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation, solely by making the utterance: **I now pronounce you man and wife**, **I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you be dead**, **I name this ship...**

Performatives

These are speech acts of a special kind where the utterance of the **right words** by the **right person** in the **right situation** effectively **is** (or accomplishes) the social act. In some cases, the speech must be accompanied by a ceremonial or ritual action. Whether the speaker in fact has the social or legal (or other kind of) standing to accomplish the act depends on some things beyond the mere speaking of the words. These are **felicity conditions**, which we can also explain by the “hereby” test. But let’s look, first, at some examples.

In the **Acts of the Apostles** (Chapter 19, verses 13-20) we read of some exorcists in Ephesus who tried to copy St. Paul and cast out evil spirits in the name of Jesus: “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims”. On one occasion the possessed man (or the evil spirit) attacked them, and said, “Jesus I know and Paul I know; but who are you?” Evidently St. Paul not only knew the words, but also had the means to call on divine aid for his exorcisms. In a slightly similar vein, Claudius, in **Hamlet**, sees that his prayer is ineffectual because “Words without thoughts never to Heaven go”.

Outside of miracle or magic, there are social realities that can be enacted by speech, **because we all accept the status of the speaker in the appropriate situation**. This is an idea expressed in the American Declaration of Independence where we read, “Governments are instituted among Men, **deriving their just Powers from the Consent** of the Governed.”

Here are some examples from different spheres of human activity, where performatives are found at work. These are loose categories, and many performatives belong to more than one of them:

- **Universities and schools:** conferring of degrees, rustivating or excluding students
- **The church:** baptizing, confirming and marrying, exorcism, commination (cursing) and excommunication
- **Governance and civic life:** crowning of monarchs, dissolution of Parliament, passing legislation, awarding honours, ennobling or decorating
- **The law:** enacting or enforcing of various judgements, passing sentence, swearing oaths and plighting one’s troth
- **The armed services:** signing on, giving an order to attack, retreat or open fire
- **Sport:** cautioning or sending off players, giving players out, appealing for a dismissal or declaring (closing an innings) in cricket
- **Business:** hiring and firing, establishing a verbal contract, naming a ship
- **Gaming:** placing a bet, raising the stakes in poker

The “hereby” test

One simple but crude way to decide whether a speech act is of such a kind that we can aptly call it a performative is to insert the word “hereby” between subject and verb. If the resulting utterance makes sense, then the speech act is probably a performative. For example,

- “I hereby confer upon you the honourable degree of Bachelor of Arts...”
- “I hereby sentence you to three months’ probation, suspended for a year...”
- “I hereby appoint you Grandmaster of the Ancient, Scandalous and Disreputable Order of Friends of the Hellfire Club ...”

It is crude, because it implies at least one felicity condition – whatever it is to which “hereby” refers. In the first example, “hereby” may refer to a physical action (touching on the head or shoulder with a ceremonial staff or mace, say). In the second example it may refer to the speaker’s situation – in sitting as chairman of the bench of magistrates. The third example is my (plausible) invention – showing how all sorts of private groups (Freemasons, Rotarians, even the school Parent Teacher Association) can have their own agreements, which give to some speakers the power to enact performatives.

Felicity conditions

These are conditions necessary to the success of a speech act. They take their name from a Latin root – “felix” or “happy”. They are conditions needed for success or achievement of a performative. Only certain people are qualified to declare war, baptize people or sentence convicted felons. In some cases, the speaker must be sincere (as in apologizing or vowing). And external circumstances must be suitable: “Can you give me a lift?” requires that the hearer has a motor vehicle and is able to drive it somewhere and that the speaker has a reason for the request. It may be that the utterance is meant as a joke or sarcasm, in which case a different interpretation is in order. Loosely speaking, felicity conditions are of three kinds: preparatory conditions, conditions for execution and sincerity conditions.

Preparatory conditions

Preparatory conditions include the status or authority of the speaker to perform the speech act, the situation of other parties and so on.

So, in order to confirm a candidate, the speaker must be a bishop; but a mere priest can baptize people, while various ministers of religion and registrars may solemnize marriages (in England). In the case of marrying, there are other conditions – that neither of the couple is already married, that they make their own speech acts, and so on. We sometimes speculate about the status of people (otherwise free to marry) who act out a wedding scene in a play or film – are they somehow, really, married? In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has no worries, because the words of the ceremony are not spoken on stage, and, anyway, Juliet’s part is played by a boy. (Though this may make the wedding scene seem blasphemous to some in the audience.)

In the UK only the monarch can dissolve parliament. A qualified referee can caution a player, if he or she is officiating in a match. The referee’s assistant (who, in the higher leagues, is also a qualified referee) cannot do this.

The situation of the utterance is important. If the US President jokingly “declares” war on another country in a private conversation, then the USA is not really at war. This, of course, happened (on 11 August 1984), when Ronald Reagan made some remarks off-air, as he thought, but which have been recorded for posterity:

“My fellow Americans, I’m pleased to tell you today that I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.”

One hopes that this utterance also failed in terms of sincerity conditions.

Conditions for execution

Conditions for execution can assume an exaggerated importance. We are so used to a ritual or ceremonial action accompanying the speech act that we believe the act is invalidated, if the action is lacking – but there are few real examples of this.

Take refereeing of association football. When a referee cautions a player, he (or she) should take the player's name, number and note the team for which he plays. The referee may also display a yellow card, but this is **not necessary to the giving of the caution**:

“The mandatory use of the cards is merely a simple aid for better communication”

The Football Association (1998); **Advice on the Application of the Laws of the Game**, p. 9

In knighting their subjects, English monarchs traditionally touch the recipient of the honour on both shoulders with the flat side of a sword blade. But this, too, is not necessary to the performance of the act.

A story is told in Oxford of a young man, taking his final exams, who demanded a pint of beer from the invigilators. He pointed out that he was wearing his sword, as required by the mediaeval statute that made provision for the drink. The invigilator (exam supervisor), believing the young man's version of events brought the beer, but checked the statutes. Later the young man received a fine – he had not, as the statute also required, been wearing his spurs. The story may well be an urban myth, but illustrates neatly a condition of execution.

Sincerity conditions

At a simple level these show that the speaker must really intend what he or she says. In the case of apologizing or promising, it may be impossible for others to know how sincere the speaker is. Moreover sincerity, as a genuine intention (now) is no assurance that the apologetic attitude will last, or that the promise will be kept. There are some speech acts – such as **plighting one's troth** or **taking an oath** – where this sincerity is determined by the presence of witnesses. The one making the promise will not be able later to argue that he or she didn't really mean it.

A more complex example comes in the classroom where the teacher asks a question, but the pupil supposes that the teacher knows the answer and is, therefore, not sincere in asking it. In this case “Can you, please, tell me X?” may be more acceptable to the child than “What is X?”

We can also use our understanding of sincerity conditions humorously, where we ask others, or promise ourselves, to do things which we think the others know to be impossible: “Please can you make it sunny tomorrow?”

Conversational Implicature

In a series of lectures at Harvard University in 1967, the English language philosopher H.P. (Paul) Grice outlined an approach to what he termed **conversational implicature** – how hearers manage to work out the complete message when speakers mean more than they say. An example of what Grice meant by conversational implicature is the utterance:

“Have you got any cash on you?”

where the speaker really wants the hearer to understand the meaning:

“Can you lend me some money? I don't have much on me.”

The **conversational implicature** is a message that is not found in the plain sense of the sentence. The speaker **implies** it. The hearer is able to **infer** (work out, read between the lines) this message in the utterance by appealing to the rules governing successful conversational interaction. Grice proposed that implicatures like the second sentence can be calculated from the first, by understanding three things:

- The usual linguistic meaning of what is said.
- Contextual information (shared or general knowledge).
- The assumption that the speaker is obeying what Grice calls the **cooperative principle**.

Conversational maxims and the cooperative principle

The success of a conversation depends upon the various speakers' approach to the interaction. The way in which people try to make conversations work is sometimes called the cooperative principle. We can understand it partly by noting those people who are exceptions to the rule, and are not capable of making the conversation work. We may also, sometimes, find it useful deliberately to infringe or disregard it – as when we receive an unwelcome call from a telephone salesperson, or where we are being interviewed by a police officer on suspicion of some terrible crime.

Paul Grice proposes that in ordinary conversation, speakers and hearers share a **cooperative principle**. Speakers shape their utterances to be understood by hearers. The principle can be explained by four underlying rules or maxims. (David Crystal calls them **conversational maxims**. They are also sometimes named **Grice's** or Gricean **maxims**.) They are the maxims of **quality, quantity, relevance** and **manner**.

- **Quality** – speakers should be truthful. They should not say what they think is false, or make statements for which they have no evidence.
- **Quantity** – a contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation to proceed. It should be neither too little, nor too much. (It is not clear how one can decide what quantity of information satisfies the maxim in a given case.)
- **Relevance** – speakers' contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- **Manner** – speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

Grice does not of course prescribe the use of such maxims. Nor does he (I hope) suggest that we use them to construct conversations. But they are useful for **analysing** and **interpreting** conversation, and may reveal purposes of which (either as speaker or listener) we were not previously aware. Very often, we communicate particular non-literal meanings by appearing to "violate" or "flout" these maxims. If you were to hear someone described as having "one good eye", you might well assume the person's other eye was defective, even though nothing had been said about it at all.

Relevance

Some linguists (such as Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell, who call it a “**Supermaxim**”) single out **relevance** as of greater importance than Grice recognised (Grice gives **quality** and **manner** as supermaxims). Assuming that the cooperative principle is at work in most conversations, we can see how hearers will try to find meaning in utterances that seem meaningless or irrelevant. We assume that there must be a reason for these. Jackson and Stockwell cite a conversation between a shopkeeper and a 16-year old customer:

Customer: Just these, please.
Shopkeeper: Are you eighteen?
Customer: Oh, I’m from Middlesbrough.
Shopkeeper: (after a brief pause) OK (serves beer to him).

Jackson H., and Stockwell, P. (1996), *An Introduction to the Nature and Functions of Language*, p. 142

Jackson and Stockwell suggest that “there is no explanation for” the customer’s “bizarre reply”. Perhaps this should be qualified: we cannot be sure what the explanation is, but we can find some plausible answer. Possible explanations might include these:

- The young man thought his being from Middlesbrough might explain whatever it was about him that had made the shopkeeper suspicious about his youth.
- The young man thought the shopkeeper’s question was provoked by his manner of speaking, so he wanted to explain this.
- The young man was genuinely flustered and said the first thing he could think of, while trying to think of a better reason for his looking under-age.
- The young man thought that the shopkeeper might treat someone from Middlesbrough in a more indulgent manner than people from elsewhere.

Jackson and Stockwell suggest further that the shopkeeper “derived some inference or other” from the teenager’s reply, since she served him the beer. It might of course be that she had raised the question (how old is this customer?) once, but when he appeared to have misunderstood it, was not ready to ask it again or clarify it – perhaps because this seemed too much like hard work, and as a stranger, the teenager would be unlikely to attract attention as a regular under-age purchaser of beer.

In analysing utterances and searching for relevance we can use a hierarchy of propositions – those that might be asserted, presupposed, entailed or inferred from any utterance.

- **Assertion** – what is asserted is the obvious, plain or surface meaning of the utterance (though many utterances are not assertions of anything).
- **Presupposition** – what is taken for granted in the utterance. “I saw the Mona Lisa in the Louvre” presupposes that the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre.
- **Entailments** – logical or necessary corollaries of an utterance, thus, the above example entails:
 - I saw something in the Louvre.
 - I saw something somewhere.
 - Something was seen.
 - There is a Louvre.
 - There is a Mona Lisa, and so on.

Inferences are interpretations that other people draw from the utterance, for which we cannot always directly account. From this example, someone might infer, rationally, that the Mona Lisa is, or was recently, on show to the public. They might infer, less rationally, that the speaker has been to France recently – because if the statement were about something from years ago, he or she would have said so.

Rhetorical coherence and the given/new distinction

In conveying a message, we should think about more than just "who did what to whom." We also have to keep in mind what our listeners know already, and how to present the message in an intelligible and coherent manner.

We should not assume that our listeners have particular knowledge. Even if we are sure they do have knowledge of something about which we wish to speak, we may need to introduce it, or recall what they already know. Our listeners may do this for us, as when one's parent, irked by a personal pronoun demands to know: "Who's she? The cat's mother?"

Similarly, we should not introduce familiar things as if they were new. This may seem patronizing, but can also be confusing, since our listeners may try to find a new interpretation to match our implication of novelty.

One way in which we show that information is new is by using nouns. Once it is familiar we refer (back) to it by using deictic (see below) pronouns – like "this" or "it".

Names and addresses

T and V pronouns

Some languages have different forms for "you" (French "tu/vous", German "du/Sie", for example). These may originally have indicated number (*vous* and *Sie* used for plural forms, but now show different levels of formality, with *tu* and *du* being more familiar, *vous* and *Sie* more polite. In English this was shown historically by the contrast between *you* and *thou/thee*. The "thou" form survives in some dialects, while other familiar pronoun forms are "youse" (Liverpool) and "you-all" (southern USA). Where it is possible to make the distinction, this is known as a T/V system of address.

In this system the V form is a marker of politeness or deference. It may also be a marker of status, with the V form used to superiors, the T form to equals or inferiors. T forms are also used to express solidarity or intimacy. The T form is found in Shakespeare's plays, where it almost always shows the speaker's attitude to status and situation. A king is "your majesty" or "you" but a peasant is "thou". It may be an insult, as when Tybalt addresses Romeo as "thou" ("Romeo, thou art a villain"; *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, Scene 3). It is also found in "frozen" language forms, such as the stylized speech of Quakers or other non-conformist groups, like the Pennsylvania Amish, in orders of service and prayers. Oddly, many modern speakers think that "thou" (being archaic) is more formal or courteous than "you" – when the reverse is the case!

Titles and names

In English, we also express status and attitude through titles, first names and last names. Titles are such things as Professor, Dr, Sir, Dame, Fr. (Father), Mr, Mrs, Miss, Sr. (Sister). Note that we abbreviate some of these in writing, but not in speaking. First names may be given names (Fred, Susan) but include epithets such as chief, guv, mate, man, pal. Last names are usually family names. In general, use of these on their own suggests lack of deference ("Oi, Smith...") but in some contexts (public schools, the armed forces) they are norms. If one speaker uses title and last name (TLN), and the other first name (FN) only, we infer difference in status. The social superior (the FN speaker) may invite the inferior to use FN in response:

A: Professor Cringeworthy? B: Please call me Cuthbert.

In schools teachers use FN (or FNLN when reprimanding or being sarcastic) to pupils and receive T ("Sir") or TLN ("Miss Brodie") in reply. "Miss" is addressed to women teachers, even where the speaker knows or believes them to be married.

In English avoidance of address is often acceptable – thus where French speakers say "Bonsoir, Monsieur", English speakers may say merely, "Good evening" (Omitting the address in France would seem impolite.)

The politeness principle

The **politeness principle** is a series of maxims, which Geoff Leech has proposed as a way of explaining how politeness operates in conversational exchanges. Leech defines politeness as forms of behaviour that establish and maintain comity. That is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony. In stating his maxims Leech uses his own terms for two kinds of illocutionary acts. He calls representatives "assertives", and calls directives "impositives".

- Each maxim is accompanied by a sub-maxim (between square brackets), which is of less importance. These support the idea that negative politeness (avoidance of discord) is more important than positive politeness (seeking concord).
- Not all of the maxims are equally important. For instance, "Tact" influences what we say more powerfully than does "Generosity", while "Approbation" is more important than "Modesty".
- Note also that speakers may adhere to more than one maxim of politeness at the same time. Often one maxim is on the forefront of the utterance, with a second maxim being invoked by implication.
- If politeness is not communicated, we can assume that the politeness attitude is absent.

Leech's maxims

- **Tact maxim** (in directives [impositives] and commissives): minimise cost to other; [maximise benefit to other]
- **Generosity maxim** (in directives and commissives): minimise benefit to self; [maximise cost to self]
- **Approbation maxim** (in expressives and representatives [assertives]): minimise dispraise of other; [maximise praise of other]
- **Modesty maxim** (in expressives and representatives): minimise praise of self; [maximise dispraise of self]
- **Agreement maxim** (in representatives): minimise disagreement between self and other; [maximise agreement between self and other]
- **Sympathy maxim** (in representatives): minimise antipathy between self and other; [maximise sympathy between self and other]

Face and politeness strategies

Face (as in **lose face**) refers to a speaker's sense of linguistic and social identity. Any speech act may impose on this sense, and is therefore face threatening. And speakers have strategies for lessening the threat. Positive politeness means being complimentary and gracious to the addressee (but if this is overdone, the speaker may alienate the other party). Negative politeness is found in ways of mitigating the imposition:

- **Hedging:** Er, could you, er, perhaps, close the, um, window?
- **Pessimism:** I don't suppose you could close the window, could you?
- **Indicating deference:** Excuse me, sir, would you mind if I asked you to close the window?
- **Apologizing:** I'm terribly sorry to put you out, but could you close the window?
- **Impersonalizing:** The management requires all windows to be closed.

A good illustration of a breach of these strategies comes from Alan Bleasdale's 1982 TV drama, **The Boys from the Black Stuff**, where the unemployed Yosser Hughes greets potential employers with the curt demand: "Gizza job!"

Perhaps the most thorough treatment of the concept of politeness is that of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, which was first published in 1978 and then reissued, with a long introduction, in 1987. In their model, politeness is defined as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts (FTAs). In their theory, communication is seen as potentially dangerous and antagonistic. A strength of their approach over that of Geoff Leech is that they explain politeness by deriving it from more fundamental notions of what it is to be a human being. The basic notion of their model is 'face'. This is defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself'. In their framework, face consists of two related aspects.

- One is **negative face**, or the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition - wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others.
- The other is **positive face**, the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people.

The rational actions people take to preserve both kinds of face, for themselves and the people they interact with, add up to politeness. Brown and Levinson also argue that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously.

In everyday conversation, we adapt our conversation to different situations. Among friends we take liberties or say things that would seem discourteous among strangers. And we avoid over-formality with friends. In both situations we try to avoid making the hearer embarrassed or uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected. Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTAs. Suppose I see a crate of beer in my neighbour's house. Being thirsty, I might say:

- I want some beer
- Is it OK for me to have a beer?
- I hope it's not too forward, but would it be possible for me to have a beer?
- I could really do with a beer in this heat.

Brown and Levinson sum up human "politeness" behaviour in four strategies, which correspond to these examples: **bald on record**, **negative politeness**, **positive politeness**, and **off-record-indirect** strategy.

- The **bald on-record** strategy does nothing to minimize threats to the hearer's "face"
- The **positive politeness** strategy shows you recognize that your hearer has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity.
- The **negative politeness** strategy also recognizes the hearer's face. But it also recognizes that you are in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if..."
- **Off-record indirect** strategies take some of the pressure off of you. You are trying to avoid the direct FTA of asking for a beer. Instead you would rather it be offered to you once your hearer sees that you want one.

These strategies are not universal – they are used more or less frequently in other cultures. For example, in some eastern societies the off-record-indirect strategy will place on your hearer a social obligation to give you anything you admire. So speakers learn not to express admiration for expensive and valuable things in homes that they visit.

Examples from Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies

Bald on-record

- An Emergency: HELP!!
- Task oriented: Give me that!
- Request: Put your coat away.
- Alerting: Turn your headlights on! (When alerting someone to something they should be doing)

Positive Politeness

- Attend to the hearer: "You must be hungry, it's a long time since breakfast. How about some lunch?"
- Avoid disagreement: A: "What is she, small?" B: "Yes, yes, she's small, smallish, um, not really small but certainly not very big."
- Assume agreement: "So when are you coming to see us?"
- Hedge opinion: "You really should sort of try harder."

Negative Politeness

- Be indirect: "I'm looking for a comb."
- Forgiveness: "You must forgive me but...."
- Minimize imposition: "I just want to ask you if I could use your computer?"
- Pluralize the person responsible: "We forgot to tell you that you needed to by your plane ticket by yesterday."

Off-Record (indirect)

- Give hints: "It's cold in here."
- Be vague: "Perhaps someone should have been more responsible."
- Be sarcastic, or joking: "Yeah, he's a real rocket scientist!"

Phatic tokens

These are ways of showing status by orienting comments to **oneself**, to the **other**, or to the general or prevailing **situation** (in England this is usually the weather).

- Self-oriented phatic tokens are personal to the speaker: “I’m not up to this” or “My feet are killing me”.
- Other-oriented tokens are related to the hearer: “Do you work here?” or “You seem to know what you’re doing”.
- A neutral token refers to the context or general state of affairs: “Cold, isn’t it?” or “Lovely flowers”.

A superior shows consideration in an other-oriented token, as when the Queen says to the factory worker: “It must be jolly hard to make one of those”. The inferior might respond with a self-oriented token, like “Hard work, this”. On the surface, there is an exchange of information. In reality there is a suggestion and acceptance of a hierarchy of status. The factory worker would be unlikely to respond with, “Yes, but it’s not half as hard as visiting all these places, making a speech at Christmas and dissolving Parliament.”

Deixis

Note: this section is seriously hard. You have been warned.

According to Stephen Levinson:

“Deixis concerns the ways in which languages encode...features of the context of utterance ... and thus also concerns ways in which the interpretation of utterances depends on the analysis of that context of utterance.”

Deixis is an important field of language study in its own right – and very important for learners of second languages. But it has some relevance to analysis of conversation and pragmatics. It is often and best described as "verbal pointing", that is to say pointing by means of language. The linguistic forms of this pointing are called deictic expressions, deictic markers or deictic words; they are also sometimes called indexicals. Deictic expressions include such lexemes as:

- Personal or possessive pronouns ("I"/"you"/"mine"/"yours"),
- Demonstrative pronouns ("this"/"that"),
- (Spatial/temporal) adverbs ("here"/"there"/"now"),
- Other pro-forms ("so"/"do"),
- Personal or possessive adjectives ("my"/"your"),
- Demonstrative adjectives ("this"/"that"),
- Articles ("the").

Deixis refers to the world outside a text. Reference to the context surrounding an utterance is often referred to as **primary deixis**, **exophoric deixis** or simply **deixis** alone. **Primary deixis** is used to point to a situation outside a text (**situational deixis**) or to the speaker's and hearer's (shared) knowledge of the world (**knowledge deixis**).

Contextual use of deictic expressions is known as **secondary deixis**, **textual deixis** or **endophoric deixis**. Such expressions can refer either backwards or forwards to other elements in a text:

- **Anaphoric deixis** is backward pointing, and is the norm in English texts. Examples include demonstrative pronouns, "such", "said", "similar", "(the) same".
- **Cataphoric deixis** is forward pointing. Examples include "the following", "certain", "some" ("the speaker raised some objections..."), "this" ("Let me say this..."), "these", "several".

Deictic expressions fall into three categories:

- **Personal** deixis ("you", "us"),
- **Spatial** deixis ("here", "there") and
- **Temporal** deixis ("now", "then").

Deixis is clearly tied to the speaker's context, the most basic distinction being between "near the speaker" (**proximal**) and "away from the speaker" (**distal**). **Proximal** deictic expressions include "this", "here" and "now". **Distal** deictic expressions include "that", "there" and "then". Proximal expressions are generally interpreted in relation to the speaker's location or deictic centre. For example "now" is taken to mean some point or period in time that matches the time of the speaker's utterance. When we read, "Now Barabbas was a thief" (John 18.40) we understand that "now" does not indicate that Barabbas was still an active thief (impossible, since he was in custody) but refers instead to St. John's telling of the narrative.

Personal deixis

English does not use personal deixis to indicate relative social status in the same way that other languages do (such as those with TV pronoun systems). But the pronoun "we" has a potential for ambiguity, i.e. between exclusive "we" (excludes the hearer) and the hearer including (inclusive) "we".

Spatial deixis

The use of proximal and distal expressions in spatial deixis is confused by **deictic projection**. This is the speaker's ability to project himself or herself into a location at which he or she is not yet present. A familiar example is the use of "here" on telephone answering machines ("I'm not here at the moment..."). While writing e-mails, I often edit out the use of "here", when I see that the reader will not necessarily understand the intended meaning. (My "here" is this room in East Yorkshire, England, while yours may be this school in Maryland, this flat in Moscow or this university in Melbourne.)

It is likely that the basis of spatial deixis is psychological distance (rather than physical distance). Usually physical and (metaphorical) psychological distance will appear the same. But a speaker may wish to mark something physically close as psychologically distant, as when you indicate an item of food on your plate with "I don't like that".

Temporal deixis

Psychological distance can apply to temporal deixis as well. We can treat temporal events as things that move towards us (into view) or away from us (out of view). For instance, we speak of "the coming year" or "the approaching year". This may stem from our perception of things (like weather storms) which we see approaching both spatially and in time. We treat the near or immediate future as being close to utterance time by using the proximal deictic expression "this" alone, as in "this (that is the next) weekend" or "this evening" (said earlier in the day).

Pragmatics for exam students

Pragmatics as an explicit field of study is not compulsory for students taking Advanced level courses in English Language. But it is one of the five “descriptions of language” commended by the AQA syllabus B (the others are: lexis, grammar, phonology and semantics). In some kinds of study it will be odd if it does not appear in your analysis or interpretation of data.

In commenting on texts you are seeing for the first time, you may need to make use of some pragmatic concepts, as in this example from Adrian Attwood:

“We know from the question that Text F is a sales script. The pragmatic consideration of this text makes us look for features, which are designed to reassure the potential customer rather than to inform them. Particularly, in this case, where the script is for a telephone conversation and one of the objects from the sales-person’s viewpoint is to keep the other person talking. This means that the text will try to close off as many potential exits as possible and therefore be similar to some of the normal co-operative principles of spoken language.”

In language investigations or research, you can choose whether to undertake a task in which pragmatic analysis is appropriate. So if you really don’t like it, then avoid a task where its absence will look suspicious, and draw attention to your dislike.

One area of language study where pragmatics is more or less unavoidable is any kind of study of spoken language in social interactions (and written forms like e-mail or computer chat that approximate to speech). In studying language and occupation or language and power, you cannot reasonably avoid the use of pragmatic frameworks for analysis.

This guide has few examples in it, because I have supposed that you will apply the analytical methods, under your teachers’ guidance, to texts that you find for yourself – including spoken data in audio and video recordings.

Background reading on pragmatics

Grice, H.P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press

Leech, G.N (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*, Longman

Levinson, S. (1983) *Pragmatics*, Cambridge University Press

Levinson, S. (2000) *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*, MIT Press

Verscheuren, J. (1999) *Understanding Pragmatics*, Arnold

<http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/ling001/pragmatics.html> University of Pennsylvania linguistics department teaching notes