Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.17

Study Material

What is Pragmatics?

- It is one component of the study of human language, and can therefore be described as a branch of the academic discipline of linguistics.

- It has recently emerged, certainly within the last half century, but is now an important and thriving area that continues to expand and develop.

- Pragmatics is concerned with "meaning in context (Chapman, 2011).

- It is the study of meaning as communicated by the speaker and interpreted by the listener.

- 'It is the study of "invisible" meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said or written' (Yule, 2010) .

- It includes background knowledge context

- Relationship between the linguistic form and communicative function.

- Inter and intra-culture pragmatics

- people's intended meanings, their assumptions, purposes, goals and kinds of actions (e.g. requests, complaints etc.) when they speak.

- Human concepts are extremely difficult to analyze in consistent and objective way.

- The word ' Chota' and 'Bara' in Urdu.

- For instance, two friends are having a conversation that may imply some meanings and infer some others, without providing the clear linguistic evidence of the source of 'the meaning' of what is communicated.

- Following example is just such a problematic case:

- "I heard the speakers, I knew what they said, but I had no idea what was communicated".

- Her: So – did you?

- Him: Hey – who wouldn't?

- Thus, pragmatics is appealing as it's about how people make sense of each other linguistically, and a frustrating area of study as it requires us to make sense of people and what they have in mind. (End)

Types of Pragmatics

- Pragmatics is a very broad category, with various identifiable versions and sub divisions.

- On the basis of four articles from 'Journal of Pragmatics' (see Chapman, 2011: 5), pragmatics can be divided into two different types, currently being practiced.

- 1) Theoretical Pragmatics - concentrates on the analysis of particular aspects of meaning and on how these might be explained within more general formal accounts of language use.

- 2) Social Pragmatics -focuses on various aspects of the relationship between language use and more general social and cultural factors.

- Huang (2007:4), identifies the split in pragmatics as 'Anglo-American (theoretical pragmatics)' and 'European Continental (social pragmatics)' schools of thought generally associated with different geographical locations and traditions of thought.

- Difference between both types lies between the sorts of data they use.

- Theoretical pragmatics is not centrally concerned with describing and analyzing what people do in specific communicative situations.

- It is concerned with the question of how meaning can, in general, be communicated between speakers and hearers, given the finite resources of a language and the context.

- For Instance:

- Alexander believes that Cicero was a great orator of the past.

- Alexander does not believe that Tulius was a great orator of the past (Capone 2008:1023).

- Here details are not given about who said these sentences when, or who they are talking to.

- Once you know that Cicero and Tilius were different names for one person, raises interesting questions.

- Such questions are the points of further exploration for theoretical pragmatists.

- On the other hand, the examples that appear together with a description of their context are typical more of social than theoretical pragmatics.

- Social pragmatics is common with the fields such as conversational analysis and discourse analysis.

- [*Context: if you have written three books you are eligible to apply for a professorship*]

- *Jane's friend:* Jane should certainly consider applying for that professorship because she has written three books; in fact she has written four!

- Thus, explanations have to deal with the factors, if they are to explain anything at all. (End)

What Does Pragmatics Study?

- Pragmatics study the language used in interpersonal communication.

- As semantics covers a range of levels (grammar, syntax, lexicon) – so pragmatics is spread across a number of fields within linguistics and mostly interfaces with semantics and sociolinguistics.

- In pragmatics, three subgroups can be recognized.

- 1. Pragmalinguistics -deals with the more linguistic end of the pragmatic spectrum.

- Usage is seen from the view point of structural resources of a language, i.e. concerns aspects of context which are formally encoded in the structure of a language.

- 2. Sociopragmatics - see usage as primarily determined by social factors in communication.

- 3. Applied pragmatics - refers to practical problems of interaction in situations where successful communication is critical, e.g. medical interviews, law courts, interrogations, official counseling etc.

- Typical themes in the discussions of pragmatics are:

- Speech Acts - an utterance spoken in an actual communication situation and deals with 'How to do things with words'.

- Cooperative Principle – maxims of conversation, an unspoken agreement between speakers in conversation.

- Relevance Theory –

- the notion of relevance to the structuring of conversation; and

- maintain that a contribution is relevant if the effort required to process is there.

- i.e. if it matches the context and concurs with the assumptions of the addressee.

- Politeness - an aspect of a speaker's social behavior which shows deference towards the wishes and concerns of the addressee.

- It involves strategies for maximizing deference in exchanges, e.g. by employing indirect speech acts or by using formal address terms; to save the face of the addressee. (End)

Pragmatics and Linguistics

- Linguistics is the academic subject that is concerned with the analysis, description and explanation of human language.

- Pragmatics is often described as being a branch or field of linguistics that focuses on the interaction between language and context.

- Strictly speaking, pragmatics is described as outside of mainstream or 'core' linguistics (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) that are concerned with the analysis of language as a formal, isolated and identifiable system in its own right.

- Pragmatics stands apart because its not, exclusively, a language itself.

- Rather, it is the production and interpretation of language in relation to context of use.

- Pragmatics can perhaps be seen as an adjunct to linguistic theory.

- A phrase that become associated with the description of pragmatics was the 'wastebasket of linguistics'.

- The data of pragmatics was seen as made up of bits and pieces that could not be accommodated elsewhere.

- Bar-Hillel's analogy says, pragmatics was not just like a wastebasket for off-loading troublesome pieces of linguistic data, but a storage receptacle from which data can be extracted for syntactic or semantic analysis.

- Things have changed a lot since 1971, the subject matter of pragmatics is now in much better order and is subject to rigorous discussion.

- Far from the wastebasket, it is now a central component in the study of human communication and is important to linguistics as it has impacted its various areas.

- To Kasher (1998:104), "Chomskey's own work has largely been restricted to syntax, 'but its conception of objective, scientific methodology transcend syntax and lend themselves to interesting applications', including pragmatics". (End)

The Emergence of Pragmatics as a Distinct Field

- The use of the word 'pragmatics' to describe a separate field of study, on a par with syntax and semantics, was established during the 1970s.

- Around this time, the term was being used in a different way by different philosophers concerned with formal languages.

- The formal semanticist, Montague, wrote in late 1960s and Bar-Hillel used this term in the 1950s, 'pragmatics was the study of any language containing indexical terms'.

- Similarly, as Levinson observed it, this would make the study of all natural language fall under pragmatics, since all natural languages have indexical elements.

- The modern use of the term 'pragmatics' was emerged by the late 1960s in philosophy.

- Robert Stalnaker's 1970 article 'Pragmatics' gives a definition: 'pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed' and contrasts pragmatics with semantics, which, for Stalnaker, is the study of propositions.

- According to Gazdar, 'pragmatics had become a legitimate sub-discipline in linguistics by the late 1970s but it wasn't in the early 1970s.'

- The key factors in the emergence of linguistic pragmatics appear to be the impact of Grice's Logic and Conversation lectures, circulated in mimeograph form from the late 1960s.

- Moreover, the publication of some of the lectures as standalone papers; and the publication during the 1970s, a number of Ph.D. theses and subsequent works by linguists concerned with pragmatic topics, including Larry Horn, Ruth Kempson and Deirdre Wilson were the important contributions. (End)