

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.18

Study Material

History of Pragmatics: Development and Expansion of Pragmatics

- Pragmatics is a relatively new branch of linguistics, research on it can be dated back to ancient Greece and Rome where the term 'pragmaticus' is found in late Latin and 'pragmaticos' in Greek, both meaning of being 'practical'.
 - Modern use and practice of pragmatics is credited to the American philosophical doctrine of pragmatism.
 - The pragmatic interpretation of semiotics and verbal communication studies in Foundations of the Theory of Signs by Charles Morris (1938), for instance, helped to neatly expound the differences of mainstream enterprises in semiotics and linguistics.
 - Grice's (1975) concern of conversational meanings enlightened the modern treatment of meaning by distinguishing two kinds of meaning, natural and non-natural.
 - To him, pragmatics should center on more practical dimension of meaning (conversational meaning) which was later formulated in several ways (Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983).
 - Practical concerns also resulted in hallmark discoveries of the Cooperative Principle by Grice (1975) and the Politeness Principle by Leech (1983).
 - The impact of pragmatism has led to cross-linguistic international studies of language use, resulted in Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory.
 - The Anglo-American tradition of pragmatic study has been tremendously expanded and enriched with the involvement of researchers from the Continental countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Belgium and resulted in the establishment of the International Pragmatic Association in Antwerp (1987).
 - Throughout its development, pragmatics has been steered by the philosophical practice of pragmatism and evolving to maintain its independence as a linguistic subfield
 - keeping to its tract of being practical in treating the everyday concerned meaning.
- (END)**

Pragmatics and Ordinary Language

- Alongwith Grice's work, a number of other Oxford philosophers were actively involved in the work on meaning and conversation during the 1940s, 50s and 60s.
- The most important contributor apart from Grice was J. L. Austin, who did work on speech acts.
- Austin organized a group of philosophers whose work is known as ordinary language philosophy.
- Prevailing method was 'linguistic botanizing'; to see the distinctions made by ordinary language on the assumption that the way people speak makes many subtle distinctions, worthy of philosophical investigation.
- These philosophers were drawn into thinking about questions such as 'what saying or stating involves' and 'what else speakers do with language'.
- Grice's theories of conversation and meaning and Austin's views on speech acts are, in effect, different answers to these questions.
- Other philosophers from this group whose work has had an impact include Peter Strawson, J. O. Urmson, R. M. Hare and Stuart Hampshire.
- Strawson probably had the most influence: through reintroduction of the idea of presupposition, and because of an influential criticism that he made of Austin's conception of speech acts.
- Austin was interested in how certain speech acts create social facts, for example, the speech act of naming a ship.
- He pointed out that there are conditions that have to be met for a speech act to be successful - felicity conditions.
- According to Strawson, Austin's this interest led him to neglect the important point that many speech acts are not in this sense social.
- A more Gricean view is that what is important for successful communication is the recognition of the intention of the speaker to perform a particular speech act.
- For example, if a speaker utters an interrogative sentence, did she mean what she said as a genuine request for information, or a rhetorical question, or with some other force?
- **(End)**

The Term 'Pragmatics'

- The post-war Oxford philosophers did not generally use the term ‘pragmatics’ in their work on language use, although it had already been proposed as a label for the study of meaning in use by the American philosopher, Charles Morris.
- In his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) he distinguished between syntax, the study of the formal relations of signs to each other, semantics, the study of the meaning of signs in terms of the objects that they denote or might denote and pragmatics, ‘the science of the relation of signs to their users’ (p. 29).
- He expanded on this in his *Signs, Language, and Behavior* (1946): pragmatics ‘deals with the origins, uses, and effects of signs within the total behavior of the interpreters of signs’ (p. 219).
- Morris’ views are one origin of the very broad conception of pragmatics as the study of language use in general.
- Furthermore, classical rhetoricians were aware of figures of speech in which the speaker means something different from the words produced.
- Similarly, the classical definition of ‘verbal irony’ is as a figure of speech in which the meaning is the opposite of what one’s words mean.
- 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 philosophers concerned with formal languages.
- For the formal semanticist Richard Montague, writing in the late 1960s and following the way the linguist and philosopher Yehoshua Bar-Hillel used the term in the 1950s, pragmatics was the study of any language containing indexical terms. (End)

The Prehistory of Pragmatics

- Of course, interest in language use, communication and the difference between what is said and what is meant did not start with Morris’ definition or the work of the Oxford philosophers.
- Since antiquity, philosophers and rhetoricians have been interested in cases in which speakers mean something different from what they say.
- We might (somewhat flippantly) call this period the prehistory of pragmatics.

- The linguist, Larry Horn has traced some of the central concerns of modern pragmatics back to the work of earlier writers, for example in his book 'A Natural History of Negation' and a more recent article, 'Presupposition and implicature'.
- According to Horn, the distinction between what is said and what is meant but not said, goes back at least to the fourth century rhetoricians, Servius and Donatus, whose description of understatement is as a figure of speech in which we say less but mean more.
- Horn has shown that in the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill and Augustus de Morgan distinguished between the strict logical sense of 'some', which is compatible with 'all', and its use in common conversation, where use of 'some' often suggests not all, and that their explanations for the difference are thoroughly Gricean as:
- If I say, 'I saw some of your children', it might be inferred that I did not see them all, not because the words mean it, but because, if I had seen them all, it is most likely that I should have said so: even though this cannot be presumed unless it is presupposed that I must have known whether the children I saw were all or not. (Mill, 1867: 501)
- There is also a prehistory to the concept of presupposition.
- Before Strawson, Gottlob Frege thought that use of a singular referring expression presupposed the existence of the individual described, and Horn has shown that nineteenth-century philosopher, Christoph von Sigwart, had a rather modern view of the subject. **(End)**

Modern Pragmatics

- The current state and recent history of pragmatics are too diverse and complex to describe briefly; A few areas of interest may be picked out.
- Early in the modern period, disagreement on the principles that govern communication led to fragmentation of the field into Griceans, neo-Griceans and relevance theorists.
- There are also pragmatic theorists who work primarily on speech acts.
- In addition, the Journal of Pragmatics and the International Pragmatics Association represent a very wide variety of work falling under the broad conceptions of pragmatics as the study of language use in general and the study of language through its use.
- From the 1970s, many theorists have been interested in developing formal accounts of phenomena, particularly scalar implicature, presupposition and conventional implicature.

- **This work is now known as formal pragmatics, and has close links to dynamic approaches to semantics such as Discourse Representation Theory.**
- **In cognitively oriented work, including relevance theory, there has been interest in the structure of the mind and in how pragmatic inference is performed.**
- **Work in psychology on mindreading (or ‘theory of mind’), the ability humans have to infer other’s mental states from observation of their actions, has direct relevance to pragmatics.**
- **Pragmatic inference is fast and seems not to be hugely effortful.**
- **Gilles Fauconnier says, there is an ‘illusion of simplicity’, given that the task performed is actually rather complex.**
- **Some pragmatic theorists have been exploring the possibility of adopting insights from research into heuristics.**
- **Another very recent development is the new field of experimental pragmatics, coming into being at the intersection of pragmatics, psycholinguistics, the psychology of reasoning and developmental pragmatics, the last of which is itself a relatively new area of work.**