



Definitions of pragmatics

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Defining pragmatics

Defining pragmatics is not straightforward. In Anglo-American philosophy and linguistics, the term has a relatively narrow meaning, but even within this restricted sense, different definitions exist. Instead of providing one clear definition, Levinson explores multiple possibilities, each outlining a different scope of the field. He acknowledges that this lack of a single, clear definition might seem frustrating, but it is common in academic disciplines. Fields of study are shaped by the methods scholars prefer, their assumptions, and the specific problems they focus on, making strict definitions difficult.

However, he offers a simple definition: *Pragmatics* studies language usage. He warns that it does not fully capture what pragmaticists actually do.

1. Pragmatics is the study of those principles that will account for why a certain set of sentences are anomalous, or not possible utterances.

- *Aristotle was Greek, but I don't believe it.*

It is strange because it contradicts itself; if you state something as a fact but immediately deny believing it, the sentence becomes pragmatically unacceptable.

This sentence does not fit into the normal, expected contexts of communication. Levinson argues that this definition is flawed. It does not define pragmatics, instead, it assumes that we already know which kinds of oddities belong to pragmatics. It presupposes the boundaries of the field instead of explaining them.

2. pragmatics is the study of language from a functional perspective, that it attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes.

This means that pragmatics attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic causes. such as psychological, social, or situational pressures that influence language use. However, Levinson argues that this definition is problematic for two reasons:

- a. It does not separate pragmatics from many other disciplines interested in functional approaches to language, including psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.
- b. It may be argued that to adopt a definition of this sort is to confuse the motives for studying pragmatics, with the goals or general shape of a theory

According to this view, pragmatics should focus only on the principles of language usage, without dealing with linguistic structure. This means that pragmatics would be entirely separate from syntax (sentence structure) and semantics (meaning).

This definition aligns with Noam Chomsky's famous distinction between competence (a speaker's knowledge of language) and performance (how language is used in real-life situations). Placing pragmatics under performance (actual language use).

Thus, Katz & Fodor suggested that a theory of pragmatics (**setting selection**) would essentially be concerned with the disambiguation of sentences by the contexts in which they were uttered. Still, one could say that grammar (phonology, syntax, and semantics) assigns meanings to sentences, while pragmatics deals with interpreting those sentences in context, but the challenge lies in drawing a clear line between context-independent grammar (competence) and context-dependent interpretation (performance).

Example: the pair *rabbit and bunny* differ in that *bunny* is appropriately used by children, If you see just the word bunny on a blank postcard, you would still infer that the sender is likely addressing or referring to a child. This shows that bunny carries inherent contextual meaning.

Here we come to the heart of the definitional problem: the term pragmatics covers two different but related areas:

Context-dependent aspects of linguistic structure: Cases where context influences the form of language itself (formal vs. informal).

Principles of language usage and understanding: How speakers interpret meaning beyond the structure of language (implicatures and speech acts).

The challenge is that a single definition must account for both of these areas, which is difficult, but this does not mean pragmatics is a random mix of unrelated topics. Instead, they are closely connected,

3. Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized or encoded in the structure of a language.

Or, pragmatics is the study of just those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars.

Such a definition restricts pragmatics to the study of certain aspects of linguistic structure. It stands in strong contrast to Katz's proposal, outlined above, which viewed pragmatics as dealing only with contextual factors outside of grammar.

Levinson points out a problem with the definition:

a. Excludes the study of principles of language usage that do not affect grammar. One major issue is that conversational implicatures would lie outside pragmatics.

b. The Notion of Context: A major issue is how to define context; Levinson argues that this is actually a strength of the approach. Instead of pre-defining context, we can simply assume that pragmatics covers all non-semantic aspects of language that are encoded grammatically, but pragmatics is not the same across all languages, so there is a need to distinguish between:

Universal Pragmatics: broad principles that apply to all languages regarding how context influences meaning) and **Language-Specific Pragmatics**, that apply to individual languages. English: Has limited grammatical markers for social status (sir, your honour). Japanese: Heavily grammaticalizes social hierarchy through honorifics and speech levels.

c. The notion of grammaticalization: Levinson discusses the complex concept of "grammaticalization," which refers to the way certain contextual meanings become part of the language itself. To understand this concept better, we need to distinguish between **mere correlations**, where a linguistic form is associated with a context without being formally integrated, and **true grammaticalization**, where a feature is built into the language (French "tu" for familiarity).

Criteria to determine if a contextual feature is truly encoded in language:

- It must be intentionally communicated.
- It must be conventionally associated with the linguistic form.
- The encoding form must be a member of a contrast set.
- The linguistic form must be subject to regular grammatical processes.

In sum, Levinson evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of defining pragmatics only in terms of linguistic structure (i.e., the study of context-dependent features that are encoded in language).

Strengths:

- Pragmatics is kept strictly within linguistics.
- Covers grammaticalized context (deixis, honorifics, presupposition).

Weaknesses:

- Too restrictive—excludes how people infer extra meaning.
- Ignores conversational implicatures (unstated but understood meanings).
- Handles linguistic structure well but not principles of language use.

4. Pragmatics is the study of all those aspects of meaning not captured in a semantic theory **Or**, as Gazdar has put it, assuming that semantics is limited to the statement of truth conditions:

Pragmatics = Meaning – Truth Conditions

Pragmatics examines meaning in language beyond what is defined by the words and their literal interpretations (semantics). While semantics focuses on the truth conditions of statements, pragmatics looks at additional aspects of meaning that can't be explained solely by those truth conditions.

Example: “Can you pass the salt?”

Semantically, this is a yes/no question about ability.

Pragmatically, it is understood as a request (not just a literal question).

If semantics is about meaning, then why do we need pragmatics?

Such a definition causes puzzlement. Surely semantics is by definition, the study of meaning in its entirety, so how can there be any residue to constitute the topic of pragmatics?

First, we need to distinguish between some broad sense of the term semantics used in a more or less pre-theoretical way. Semantic theory has a very much narrower scope than the study of meaning in its entirety.

Secondly, the intended scope of the term meaning in the definition is extremely broad, in a way that will need explication(clarification).

One objection to such a definition could be that the scope of pragmatics would vary according to the kind of semantic theory adopted. If semantics is **narrowly** defined (truth-conditional), then a lot of meaning is left for pragmatics to study. If semantics is **broadly** defined (Componential Analysis), then pragmatics has much less to study. There are some challenges a semantic theorist faces when deciding how much meaning to include in their theory.

If semantics focuses only on truth-conditional meaning, it will be (a) there are no conflicting principles for the inclusion or exclusion of phenomena, and (b) semantic theory can be built on strictly homogeneous lines. Such semantics will be narrow, and leave a great deal to pragmatics.

On the other hand, **If semantics includes all conventional meanings** of an utterance's significance, then the semantic theory will deal with aspects 1 and 2, 3 and 4, (a) this creates conflicting principles and (b) the theory becomes heterogeneous.

Table 1. 1 Elements of the communicational content of an utterance

1. truth-conditions or entailments
2. conventional implicatures
3. presuppositions
4. Felicity conditions
5. conversational implicature - generalized
6. conversational implicature - particularized
7. inferences based on conversational structure

Levinson justifies choosing a truth-conditional semantic theory by presenting four key reasons why it is the best working model for studying pragmatics.

First, it clearly defines the nature of a semantics/pragmatics boundary.

Secondly, other theories can be incorporated into it, making it more flexible

Thirdly, it is perhaps still the kind of theory with the most support in linguistic and philosophical circles.

Finally, many of the issues in pragmatics have arisen historically from this theory, and many core topics in pragmatics (implicature, presupposition) were originally studied in relation to truth-conditional semantics.)

The idea that pragmatics may cover aspects of meaning not addressed by semantics is plausible. However, a key challenge arises:

Does pragmatics include all possible inferences from what is said and known about the world?

Example: If someone says his watch broke and another infers he committed a crime, is that part of communication? No, because the speaker did not intentionally communicate that information.

Not all possible conclusions drawn from what is said or known about the world are relevant to the actual communication. Only those interpretations that the speaker intended to convey are considered part of pragmatics.

To help us draw a line between the incidental transfer of information and communication proper, we may appeal to an important idea of the philosopher Grice, distinguishing between.

a. Natural meaning, e.g., Those black clouds mean rain (this is just a factual observation, not an act of communication).

b. Non-natural meaning (meaning-nn) – which involves intentional communication.

Grice defines meaning-nn using two conditions:

- The speaker (S) intends the utterance (U) to cause an effect (z) in the hearer (H).
- The speaker also intends that the hearer recognizes this intention as part of understanding the message.

This means communication is not just about sending information, it is about ensuring that the receiver recognizes the sender's communicative intention, when this happens, **mutual knowledge** is established.

A major question in Grice's theory is how the listener (H) recognizes the speaker's (S) complex communicative intention. However, Grice argues that communication is not always based on fixed conventions. Grice's theory explains how there can be interesting discrepancies between **speaker-meaning** (Grice's meaning_{nn}) and **sentence-meaning**.

(U): "This soup is amazing!"

Sentence Meaning: The speaker is expressing enjoyment of the soup's taste.

Speaker Meaning: Might be entirely different; perhaps they find the soup unappetizing.

If we now adopt Grice's meaning-nn as the scope of meaning in the definition of pragmatics, we shall include the ironic, metaphoric and indirect implications and exclude the unintended inferences that have no part to play in a theory of communication.

Does Pragmatics Only Cover What Semantics Does Not?

If we define pragmatics as "everything left over after semantics," we might distinguish between **Sentence-meaning** and **Utterance-meaning**, which is important to both semantics and pragmatics.

Sentence: A grammatically complete structure independent of context.

Utterance: A real-world instance of a sentence used in a specific context.

Many scholars equate semantics with sentence-meaning and pragmatics with utterance-meaning, but this division has several problems:

- a.** Overlap Between Sentence-Meaning and Utterance-Meaning: In rare cases where a speaker means exactly what they say.
- b.** Some Sentence-Meanings Cannot Be Explained by Semantics Alone: (e.g. John stopped smoking) presuppose that John used to smoke. If truth-conditional semantics cannot handle this, then pragmatics must handle them.
- c.** Sentences Do Not Themselves Have Truth-Conditions, Only Utterances Do: Sentences alone cannot be assigned truth conditions because they often depend on context (e.g. I am now sixty-three years old). This sentence can only be true or false depending on who says it and when

We are left with the unrefined definition. Let us turn to another definition that would give the context-dependent nature of such phenomena more centrality:

5. Pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding.

Pragmatics is concerned with how language and context interact to create meaning. Simply knowing word meanings and grammar is not enough to fully understand an utterance. Instead, understanding requires making inferences that connect the speaker's words to:

What is mutually assumed (shared background knowledge).

What has been said before (previous discourse).

The strengths of such a definition are as follows:

- a. Focus on Inference:** Pragmatics is primarily about inferring meaning beyond the literal words. (e.g. presuppositions, implicatures, illocutionary force...)
- b. Avoids the Encoded/Unencoded Distinction:** Unlike older definitions, this one does not assume that semantics is about encoded meaning while pragmatics is about unencoded meaning. This is important because there is ongoing debate about whether some pragmatic elements (like presuppositions) are encoded in language or not.
- c. Connects usage rules to inference:** Language use follows systematic rules; for every such rule, there is an inference procedure that helps listeners interpret meaning.

The weaknesses of such a definition are as follows:

a. Too broad in scope: Pragmatics, under this definition, would include how linguistic knowledge interacts with all of a speaker's general world knowledge. For example, to understand the little story (*Jill wanted to get Bill a birthday present, so she went and found her piggy-bank; she shook it, but there was no noise; she would have to make Bill a present*), one needs to know the following assorted facts: presents are usually bought with money; piggy-banks are used to hold money; money inside a container of dense material will generally rattle, etc.

b. The lack of A clear definition of context: This problem arises because context is crucial in pragmatic interpretation, but it is difficult to specify what counts as context.

What might one mean by context?

one needs to distinguish between **Actual situation**: detail of where, when, and how something is said and **Relevant context**: Only the details that influence how we understand what is being said (culturally and linguistically relevant features)

What factors make up context? (Lyons).

- (i) Knowledge of role and status (who)
- (ii) Knowledge of spatial and temporal location. (where and when)
- (iii) Knowledge of formality Level. (formal or casual)
- (iv) Knowledge of the medium. (spoken or written)
- (v) Knowledge of the appropriate subject matter. (The topic of discussion)
- (vi) knowledge of appropriate province. (medical, legal, or everyday talk)

Let us now turn to one of the definitions most favoured in the literature. This definition would make central to pragmatics a notion of appropriateness or felicity:

6. Pragmatics is the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate.

This definition highlights pragmatics as the mental ability that enables speakers to determine when and where a sentence is suitable. It aligns with linguistic competence, a concept by Chomsky, which refers to the internalized knowledge of language that allows speakers to generate and understand grammatically correct sentences. If pragmatics is part of linguistic competence, it must involve an abstract cognitive system rather than being purely a matter of external social behaviour.

Another key advantage of this definition is its parallel with semantics. In formal linguistics, semantics deals with assigning **Truth Conditions** to sentences, determining under what circumstances a sentence is true or false. Similarly, this definition suggests that pragmatics is responsible for assigning **Appropriateness Conditions**, meaning that it determines whether a sentence is contextually suitable given the situation in which it is used.

But, there are several challenges and limitations in defining pragmatics this way.

a. Overlap with Sociolinguistics: Pragmatics and sociolinguistics are closely related but not the same. However, if we define pragmatics this way, it would completely merge with sociolinguistics because, according to Hymes, it also studies how language is used appropriately in different contexts

b. Cultural Variability in Contextual Appropriateness: This definition assumes one set of rules for using language appropriately, but in reality, different cultures and subcultures have different rules. If we follow this definition strictly, we would need separate pragmatic theories for each cultural group.

c. Speakers Do Not Always Follow Social Norms: The definition assumes that speakers always use language in an appropriate, socially acceptable way based on existing norms. However, in real life, speakers intentionally or unintentionally break these rules; they can be rude, sarcastic, or inappropriate despite knowing what is socially expected

7. Pragmatics is the study of deixis (at least in part), implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse structure.

One way to define pragmatics is by listing the topics it covers, such as:

- Deixis (words like this, that, now, then, whose meaning depends on context)
- Implicature (unstated but implied meaning)
- Presupposition (assumptions made before speaking)
- Speech Acts (actions performed using language, e.g., promising, apologizing)
- Discourse Structure (how sentences fit together in conversation)

The weaknesses of such a definition are as follows:

- a. It Doesn't Help New Learners:** If someone doesn't already know what these topics mean, this definition won't help them understand pragmatics.
- b. It Doesn't Set Clear Boundaries:** Pragmatics is an evolving field, and new topics might be added. The list doesn't say what should or shouldn't be included in pragmatics in the future.
- c. It Doesn't Solve Previous Definition Problems:** Earlier, we saw that defining pragmatics is difficult. When we try to clearly define what all these topics have in common, we run into the same old problems (e.g., how pragmatics differs from semantics and sociolinguistics).

Pragmatics Is Above Sociolinguistics But Below Semantics.

Since defining pragmatics directly is difficult, some linguists have tried to set its limits by placing it between two other fields:

Upper Bound (what pragmatics is not above) → Semantics

Lower Bound (what pragmatics is not below) → Sociolinguistics

This approach follows Katz & Fodor, who tried to define semantics by placing it between:

Syntax and phonology (above)

Pragmatics (contextual disambiguation) (below)

Why is this approach useful?

- a.** It acknowledges that pragmatics is related to both semantics and sociolinguistics but is not the same as either.
- b.** It helps separate pragmatics from sociolinguistics, which is important because some definitions confuse them.

Problems with this approach

- a.** The Border with Semantics is Blurry: We previously saw that it's hard to separate semantics from pragmatics.
- b.** The Border with Sociolinguistics is Unclear: Sociolinguistics studies how language varies based on social factors (dialects). Pragmatics studies context-dependent meaning, but some areas of sociolinguistics (like politeness theory) seem to overlap.

Another angle from which we might attempt conceptual clarification of the issues is to ask: **what are the goals of a pragmatic theory?** One abstract way of thinking about this is to think of a pragmatic theory as a '**black box**' and to ask what should be the input and output, which means we need to define what information (input) is needed and what outcomes (output) the theory should provide based on that information.

In linguistics, we can clearly define the inputs and outputs of **syntax and semantics**: Syntax takes words and morphemes as input, and the output is a judgment: grammatical or ungrammatical. Semantics takes well-formed sentences as input, and the output is a logical representation of the sentence's meaning. However, **pragmatics** is harder to define because it deals with how meaning changes depending on context.

Two linguists, Katz (1977) and Gazdar (1979), proposed different views on what a pragmatic theory should focus on.

a. Katz: He suggested that pragmatics should take as input the full grammatical and semantic structure of a sentence along with its context of use. The output would then be a set of propositions that fully capture the meaning of that utterance in its context. In simpler terms, pragmatics should help us understand what an utterance truly means when spoken in a specific situation.

b. Gazdar: rather than just interpreting meaning, he focused on how utterances change the context in which they are spoken. In his view, language does not just convey information; it also shapes the conversation and influences future discourse.

Both of these perspectives align with the idea that pragmatics involves the relationship between meaning and context. However, depending on how we define pragmatics, the exact role of a pragmatic theory might differ.

Several of these definitions are seen as limited or incomplete, such as restricting pragmatics to grammatically encoded aspects of context or defining it purely in terms of appropriateness.

The definitions that have gained more traction are those that link pragmatics to the idea of "meaning minus semantics" or describe it as the contribution of context to language understanding. However, even these definitions have challenges, as noted in the discussion.



Definitions of pragmatics

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