

# The Speaker's Command of Linguistic Resources to Realise Their Intent, a Definition of Pragmatics

Akihiko Kawamura

## 1. Introduction

While philosophers and linguists have defined pragmatics in various ways (Morris, 1971; Thomas, 1995; Verschueren, 1999), there is as yet no agreed definition. As Searle et al. observes (1980: viii), “‘Pragmatics’ is one of those words (‘societal’ and ‘cognitive’ and others) that give the impression that something quite specific and technical is being talked about when often in fact it has no clear meaning.’ It has even been called a ‘waste basket of linguistics’ among linguists (see, for example, Mey, 1993) because it can deal with those issues which competence oriented main stream linguistics cannot treat as its proper subjects. At the same time, as exemplified by numerous books and papers on the subject, it has come to occupy an important part of current linguistics, or rather it is attracting more and more attention nowadays especially in conjunction with language teaching (Rose and Kasper, 2001) and lexicography (Channel, 2002; Nomura, 2003). Apparently, this does not mean that it is no longer necessary to attempt to define pragmatics, because both its topics and methodologies will be considerably affected by how it is defined. Without clearly defining its proper subject it could not be possible to have common topics to investigate or methodologies of analyzing data. While, unlike the diversity of its definitions, there seems to be an agreement about the range of topics within the purview of pragmatics, it will be difficult to reach a satisfactory definition by simply listing such agreed topics. As Levinson points out, ‘For in common with all

extensional definitions, it provides no criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of further phenomena that may come to our attention' (1983: 27).

In this paper I will define what pragmatics is, paying particular attention to its borders with its related fields: semantics and sociolinguistics. Although pragmatics is sometimes classified very elaborately even within the field itself such as Leech's distinction between General pragmatics, Pragmalinguistics, Socio pragmatics and Referential pragmatics (1983: 10-3), such classification might blur the boundary between pragmatics and the related fields. I will thus not deal with the issue in this paper. Nor will I seek to discuss different approaches to the field such as Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). These are also outside the parameters of the current study.

Before moving on to the discussion, in section 2, I will present an overview of the term, pragmatics followed by more specific examinations of the existing definitions based on its four key notions: the function of language; the user of language; context; appropriateness; and their combination. In section 3, after discussing its border with semantics, I will briefly discuss the inference that an interpreter of language draws in response to an utterance, and then I will move on to the discussion about a boundary between pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Lastly, in section 5, after considering the constituents of pragmatics and its priority over other levels of language in section 4, I will be working towards the definition of pragmatics as being concerned with the speaker's command of linguistic resources in order to realise their intent, or make it recognisable.

## **2. Existing definitions of pragmatics**

### **2.1. Overview**

With such exceptions as introductory books or glossaries of technical terms in linguistics, there seem to be only a few researchers who have presented their definitions of pragmatics explicitly (Thomas, 1995: 22f; Vershueren, 1999: 7f). Some have even listed several definitions (Yule, 1996: 3). This shows how difficult it is to define pragmatics.

Among the most favoured definitions of pragmatics may be Morris' trichotomy of

semiotics: Semantics is the study of 'the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable' (1971: 21). Pragmatics is the study of 'the relation of signs to interpreters' (*ibid.*). Syntax (syntactics) is the study of 'the formal relation of signs to one another' (1971: 22). Although Morris was not the first or the only scholar who divided semiotics in this way, it will be safe to say that he was the first who explained this trichotomy clearly and made this idea generally familiar (Lyons, 1977: 114). As Mey (1993: 35) states, many pragmatists have been supporting his definition either explicitly or implicitly ever since.

Still, there are at least three problems in the trichotomy. First, the trichotomy may not be applicable to natural language, because when analysing the meaning of natural language it is necessary for semantics to refer to pragmatics (Lyons, 1977: 116f; Levinson; 1983: 3f; see also 2.4; 4.2). Second, Morris' use of the term pragmatics could be ambiguous in that it is applied not only to branches of inquiry but also to features of language under investigation and to those of the metalanguage (Levinson, 1983: 3). Third, it is questionable whether pragmatics should be restricted to interpreters, for in any use of signs there are usually two participants, the encoder and the decoder, that is, the speaker and the hearer in the case of natural language (see also 3.2). In this paper I will use the terms speaker (S) and hearer (H) respectively, referring to a producer of an utterance including a writer, as distinguished from a person who talks or writes to himself/herself, and a receiver, including a reader, as distinguished from a person who overhears an utterance or oversees a piece of writing.

In addition to Morris' definition, there are two favoured ways of defining pragmatics, one in conjunction with the user of language and the other context:

...the study of LANGUAGE from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the CONSTRAINTS they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication (*A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, 2003*)

The branch of linguistics which studies how utterances communicate meaning

in context (*Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics, 1999*)

While both of the above definitions capture an important aspect of the subject, they are not satisfactory because they cannot properly show where the boundary lies between pragmatics and its closely related fields (see 2.3 and 2.4 for detail). Importantly, the two concepts, the language user and context, are closely connected with two other key concepts of pragmatics, the function of language and appropriateness. The idea of a 'user', for example, is duly associated with a 'tool with a particular function'. In the context of pragmatics, this should be language and its function, and it largely depends on the appropriateness of context whether the function is successfully fulfilled. If someone says, 'Nice to see you' to their family in the morning, the utterance will not be taken literally. Even greetings, one of the most basic functions of language, may fail to fulfil its function in an inappropriate context. This may be the reason several scholars attempt to explain pragmatics in terms of the function of language (Leech, 1983: 47ff; Verschueren, 1999: 11 and *passim*) or appropriateness (Van Dijk, 1976: 29, Allwoods et al., 1977: 153ff). In the following subsections, I will therefore consider if it is possible to define pragmatics satisfactorily, using each of the above four key notions: the function of language; the user of language; context; appropriateness; and their combination.

## **2.2. The function of language**

The definition of pragmatics in conjunction with the function of language explains the subject, focusing on what humans do by using language and how it actually works. It is advantage of this definition that those issues which are inexplicable from inside the formal structure of language become accessible, but Levinson points out that this approach does not make it possible to distinguish pragmatics from other levels of linguistics which also approach language from functional view points, such as sociolinguistics (1983: 7).

## **2.3. The user of language**

The notion of 'the user of language' was originally derived from Morris' trichotomy, and attracted attention, particularly within the movement in linguistics

known as generative semantics. The definitions of pragmatics in terms of the language user explain the subject paying attention to the relation between S and H, and language.

The advantage of this approach is to be able to deal with such important concepts as S's intent. Here I use the term intent rather than intention which is often used in the study of pragmatics, because the term intention is ambiguous, referring to either its ordinary sense as 'one's determination to do something' or its technical use in pragmatics as force (one's will to do something by the use of language). In order to distinguish the former from the latter, I will use intent when referring to the former in this paper.

Whereas the definitions in terms of the language user have the above advantage, two serious defects are pointed out by Levinson (1983: 4f): the notion of the user of language is too broad, admitting such non-linguistic studies as Freud's on slips of tongue; at the same time, this approach is too narrow in that this excludes such issues as temporal or place deixis.

#### **2.4. Context**

Definitions of pragmatics in conjunction with context explain that semantics is restricted to a study on the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence out of context, while meaning in context should be dealt with under the heading of pragmatics. This approach is helpful in that it can take into consideration the actual use of languages rather than language as an abstract entity, though it requires a clearer idea of what context is (Levinson, 1983: 22f). Without clearly defining context, it would be difficult to delimit the scope of pragmatics. Even if it is restricted to the part of it which is encoded or grammaticalized in the formal structure of language, context is not always encoded in language (Mey, 1993: 40). More importantly, conversational implicature, one of the most popular topics in the field of pragmatics, will be outside of its domain, if context is limited to only those grammaticalized in language (Levinson, 1983: 9f).

Levinson, in this connection, suggests that semantics should be restricted to truth-conditional issues of meaning and that other issues relating to meaning should belong to pragmatics (1983: 14f and *passim*). However, Levinson also admits that to

follow a common definition of utterance as the pairing of a sentence and a context (see also Gazdar, 1979: 131), it is not sentence but utterance which can be dealt with truth conditionally; it is impossible to judge whether a sentence is true or not without referring to the actual context in which it is uttered (18-20 and *passim*). It follows from this that both semantics and pragmatics deal with meaning in context. Pragmatics cannot be defined properly in conjunction with context, particularly when considering a boundary between pragmatics and semantics.

### **2.5. Appropriateness**

The definitions of pragmatics in terms of appropriateness investigate the use of language focusing on its appropriateness in a particular context. This approach makes it possible to take into account various important factors in actual communication. Levinson (1983: 25), however, points out that to follow Hymes' explanation of sociolinguistics as the study of communicative competence (1975: 24) means that pragmatics will be identical to sociolinguistics. Although Levinson continues by saying that this approach requires almost every speech community to have its own pragmatics, I would argue that this might not be so problematic in itself without such hypotheses as universality of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987). It is also to be noted that S does not always speak in a way that is appropriate in a particular context (Grice, 1975: 48f; Levinson, 1983: 24-7). Moreover, pragmatics is generally believed to be concerned with the actual use of language so it is contrary to expectations when it only focuses on the appropriate uses of language.

### **2.6. Compromise**

Although each of the above four key notions of pragmatics is not entirely satisfactory in defining the subject, they capture an important feature of pragmatics. More importantly, they are not distinct from each other, or rather they are closely connected, as explained in 2.1. This may be why so many attempts have also been made to define pragmatics which has resulted in the combination of the above four approaches. Thomas, for example, covering most of the above key notions, defines pragmatics as meaning in interaction, where she takes into account 'negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and

linguistic) and the meaning of an utterance' (1995: 22). Still, it will be difficult to tell from this definition exactly where the boundary lies between pragmatics and sociolinguistics, particularly when considering phenomena generally known as politeness. What would be hoped for in the definition of pragmatics is first of all to show clearly the boundary between pragmatics and its closely related fields of linguistics.

Levinson states that 'the upper bound of pragmatics is provided by the border of semantics, and the lower bound by sociolinguistics' (1983: 27) using the strategy of a boundary drawing exercise proposed by Katz and Fodor (1964: 483-91). In the next section, I will therefore seek to restrict the scope of pragmatics, especially focusing on its borders with semantics and sociolinguistics

### **3. Pragmatics and its object of study**

#### **3.1. Pragmatics and semantics**

It is generally agreed that both pragmatics and semantics are deeply concerned with meaning (Thomas, 1995; Cruse, 2000), and it is sometimes extremely difficult to distinguish them clearly; several linguists even insist that pragmatics is in fact a part or aspect of semantics (Wierzbicka, 1991: 5). It will naturally follow from this that it would be also important to have a clear understanding of what meaning is. Although not only linguists but philosophers have been attempting to define meaning in various ways, as Cruse suggests, 'Meaning makes little sense except in the context of communication' (2000: 5). In this paper I will thus confine myself to meaning in the context of actual communication, and I will tentatively define meaning as something conveyed in actual communication via language.

Thomas (1995: 2-21) divides meaning into three levels: abstract meaning (dictionary meaning), utterance meaning (contextual meaning) and force. The abstract meaning is a range of meaning, or sense inherent in a particular word, phrase or sentence. The utterance meaning is a particular sense used in a particular utterance. The force is the speaker's intention (see 2.3) of an utterance in a particular context. According to Thomas, abstract meaning belongs to semantics, while speaker meaning, consisting of utterance meaning and force, belongs to pragmatics. This is

clear enough as a starting point, but abstract meaning can sometimes become rather similar to force in the case of such expressions as I *guess*. Moreover, abstract meaning necessarily or logically generates another level of meaning, entailment. As entailment is basically derived from abstract meaning, I will include entailment under the domain of semantics. When considering pragmatics, however, there is another type of meaning, presupposition.

In the following sentence, 'Mary's brother bought three horses' (Yule, 1996: 25), in addition to the above three levels of meaning, presuppositions and entailments are observable. Yule explains that entailment is something logically derivable from what is asserted in the utterance, while presupposition is something S assumes to be true prior to making an utterance. The entailments in the above example included the following:

- (A) 'Mary's brother bought something'
- (B) 'he bought three animals'

On the other hand, the presuppositions are as follows:

- (a) 'there is a person called Mary'
- (b) 'she has a brother'
- (c) 'she has only one brother'
- (d) 'he has a lot of money'

As entailment is the result of logical reasoning based on abstract meaning, it is necessarily true as long as abstract meaning is true. On the other hand, presupposition is not always the case; it can in fact be wrong. It is thus cancellable without any contradiction. This cancellability of presuppositions is very important because this can be a criterion for distinguishing semantic meaning from pragmatic meaning. For instance, the following statement, 'It's rather hot in here' can convey much more than its abstract meaning does. In a particular social situation, it may be taken as an indirect request to open the window in the place of the utterance. On another occasion, it can be taken as an excuse for opening the window suddenly



without asking permission from others. These interpretations cannot be attained only through the abstract meaning of the statement or logical reasoning based on it. Moreover, they are cancellable, if S says, for instance, 'It's rather hot in here. Can I have something cold to drink?'. Yule explains the two types of meaning as follows: 'Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions' and 'Sentences, not speakers, have entailments' (1996: 25). It will appear here that S's intent plays a crucial role in this phenomenon (see also Levinson, 1983: 16ff).

Whenever S uses language in actual communications, S employs it to realise or make recognisable S's particular intent with due exceptions such as an unintentional cry of pain, *ouch*. I use the verb *realise* here in order to cover a wider range of phenomena than another verb like *express* can. In the case of speech act, using language, S may even perform some action, as well as express how S feels by inducing in H's mind a particular belief reflecting S's intent (Grice, 1979: 219). In this connection, the phrase *achieve one's goal* is among the most favoured in the field of pragmatics. Leech, for instance, argues that the term *intended meaning* or S's *intention* in an utterance is less neutral than *goal* or *function* of an utterance and therefore misleading (see also 3.2). However, as noted in 2.2, the term *function* is also misleading when discussing pragmatics. While Leech also argues that the intended meaning or S's intention confines itself to S's conscious or deliberate action (1983: 13-4), as I will argue in 3.3, whether S's decision is deliberate or not would be the only criterion available for drawing the boundary between pragmatics and its related fields. Thus I use the phrase to *realize one's intent* in this paper.

When S's intent can be realised sufficiently only through the abstract meaning of S's utterance or logical reasoning based on it, pragmatics and semantics overlap on the surface. Similarly, when S's intent cannot be realised through the abstract meaning or logical reasoning, S's intent must in some way go beyond the scope of abstract meaning and logic, in other words, S's intent becomes pragmatically marked. This is where the boundary lies between pragmatics and semantics. The above utterance, 'It's rather hot in here' is one such example.

I thus conclude that semantics is concerned with those kinds of meaning which can be gained from the abstract meaning of a word, phrase or utterance and/or logical reasoning based on it. Other levels of meaning beyond that scope should be regarded

as belonging to the domain of pragmatics. Levinson (1983) also suggests that the most promising criterion which could be used to distinguish between pragmatics and semantics would be to restrict pragmatics to the rest of meaning semantics treats, but his opinion is slightly different from mine in that he basically insists on confining semantics to those issues which can be dealt with truth conditionally (see also 2. 4).

### 3.2. Hearer meaning

In the context of actual communication, it may be also necessary to consider those kinds of inference that H draw in H's mind in reaction to S's utterance. In fact, one of the recent trends in the study of meaning is a consideration of the negotiation of meaning between S and H (see also 2.6). Cruse even includes H's inferred message in meaning (2000: 6 and *passim*), and the inferred message is usually referred to as hearer meaning.

Hearer meaning is usually identical to speaker meaning, for S normally makes every effort to realize S's intent, even considering H's mental state such as whether H possesses the same reasoning pattern as S's. S will thus repeat an utterance several times more slowly or even paraphrase it with easier expressions, once S notices that H is a foreigner and does not have a good command of S's language. In this way it will become possible to take into account process of how H recognizes S's intent, though it is crucial to decide to what extent hearer meaning should be treated in the domain of pragmatics.

Verschueren argues that it is problematic to define meaning in terms of S's intentionality because such a view cannot properly treat the case where hearer meaning has become completely different from S's intent (1999: 46-9). Verschueren gives the following example:

Dan: Como is a giant silk worm.

Debby: Yukh! What a disgusting idea! (1999: 48)

In this example, Dan simply intends to say that Como produces a large amount of silk, which apparently results in Debby's failure to recognize it. Although when

examining meaning it would be very useful to consider H's mental state to some extent, I will strongly argue that it is not meaning but a mistake or failure if H cannot capture S's intent correctly. Miller states:

Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them, or to parse their sentences, or to understand their words. Such problems do occur, of course. But far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intentions.

(Miller, 1974: 15)

Debby's wrong inference above should be regarded as an example of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983: 91) rather than another level of meaning. Thus I do not include in meaning H's failure to recognise S's intent. Thomas (1983: 94), in this connection, points out that pragmatic misuse and/or misunderstanding of an expression cannot be judged according to prescriptive rules such as grammatical ones and that it is not legitimate to refer to pragmatic misuse and/or misunderstanding of an expression as 'mistake' or 'error'. She therefore terms it pragmatic failure, and I will follow her terminology in this paper.

### **3.3. Pragmatics and sociolinguistics**

Pragmatics and sociolinguistics overlap, particularly when considering such phenomena as politeness. Thomas explains how politeness is different from deference and register in terms of whether S has a choice (1995: 150-5). In some languages such as Japanese, S is obliged to speak in a particular manner or use a particular expression to show S's respect for S's superior in a particular social situation. In this case S has no choice. On the other hand, S is not forced to speak in a particular manner in the case of politeness. S *intentionally* speaks or behaves as S wishes, either politely or rudely. Thomas continues by saying that it is only when S does not speak as people normally expect that deference and register become pragmatically interesting, and that as long as S follows the conventions of society, deference and register should be investigated under the heading of sociolinguistics. If there is in fact no choice as to S's way of speaking, however, S is not allowed to speak as S

wishes, which means that S cannot speak in a pragmatically interesting manner. I should here like to point up the fact that it is also S's deliberate decision to follow the social conventions, though this kind of decision will usually be made almost unconsciously and instantly. I would argue that one of the most important features of pragmatics is to be concerned with S's intent, as I have pointed out in 3.1.

When S uses language according to S's sociolinguistic norms, S intends to follow the social conventions; that is to say, S's intent and sociolinguistic knowledge happen to agree on the surface. On the other hand, when S does not follow the socially desirable conventions, S's intent goes beyond the scope of sociolinguistic knowledge and therefore S's intent becomes pragmatically marked (see also 3.1). This can provide support for Thomas' explanation which is that only when S does not speak in a sociolinguistically appropriate manner do deference and register become pragmatically interesting. This view, however, can include too wide a range of linguistic phenomena under pragmatics, and so it should be restricted to those cases where pragmatics and other levels of linguistics do not overlap, in other words, where S's intent is pragmatically marked.

Although Thomas insists that the use of intimate address should also belong to the domain of pragmatics (1995: 186), like deference and register, the use of intimate address depends on S's intent. S may or may not decide to use it bearing in mind the social conventions, and when S decides to use intimate address appropriately according to S's sociolinguistic knowledge, S's intent agrees with S's sociolinguistic knowledge. Only when S does not use intimate address as S's sociolinguistic knowledge normally requires, does its use become part of pragmatics.

My explanation will not suffice, unless this can provide S's motivations for not expressing S's intent explicitly such as 'Please open the window'. When S requests H to open the window, S first intends to realize S's intent. At this stage pragmatic principles work, such as Grice's famous Cooperative Principle and its four Conversational Maxims (1975: 45ff). The point is that the principle and the maxims alone cannot explain why S often does not express S's intent explicitly (Imai, 2001: 195). Leech therefore proposes a Politeness principle (1983: 7-10) which motivates S's way of speaking in terms of politeness. In the case of face threatening act, for instance, after S's intent has gone through the above pragmatic principles, or

processes, S measures how demanding S's request sounds, exercising S's sociolinguistic knowledge and the Politeness Principle. Then S normally decides to realize S's intent using a less forceful and politer way of speaking.

Now that the borders between pragmatics and its related fields have been determined, in the next section I will consider the constituents of pragmatics and their relationships with other levels of language.

#### **4. A command of linguistic resources**

##### **4.1. Linguistic resources**

In actual communication, as we have seen in the previous discussions, S has a particular intent from the outset, and then, in order to realise it, employs almost every part of language which I will term linguistic resources. Verschueren uses a similar term, language resources when distinguishing pragmatics from traditional component disciplines of linguistics. Language resources are different from my term, linguistic resources, in that the former can be identified with a particular unit of analysis, while the latter cannot. Sociolinguistic knowledge is thus not a part of language resources because it does not have any specific unit of analysis. Linguistic resources, on the other hand, include every constituent of language ranging from abstract meaning to sociolinguistic knowledge. I therefore do not use the term language resources when discussing pragmatics.

I also avoid the term competence in Chomsky's sense or Saussure's *langue* because it is doubtful if language can in fact be divided into two in that way. The two way division may make competence and *langue* too abstract, even excluding the context of an utterance (see also Levinson, 1983: 33f). In actual communication, S may use sociolinguistic knowledge which is closely connected with such variables as context and cannot be part of abstract notion like competence. For the purpose of causing in H's mind a belief that S is really angry, S may even employ phonological resources such as intonation.

Therefore, it can be concluded that pragmatics is concerned with linguistic resources.

#### 4.2. A command of linguistic resources

Pragmatic phenomena are observable in almost every part of language. Vershueren therefore proposes a definition of pragmatics as a perspective (1999: 7 and *passim*). Levinson also points out that pragmatics can be ‘a way of looking afresh at the data and methods of linguistics’ (1983: 33). Nevertheless, what is missing in these opinions is that pragmatics is in fact prior to any other level of linguistic resources. While many linguists have been supporting the idea that pragmatics is prior to semantics in the sense that it necessarily refers pragmatics (Gazdar, 1979: 164–8; Stankler, 1972: 383; also 2.4 for details), this priority of pragmatics is also applicable to other aspects of linguistic resources. As illustrated in 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, only S’s intent first exists and then moves on to other levels, not the other way around. It might be also true that S’s thought is strongly influenced by S’s native language and culture, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests, but as long as an utterance on a particular occasion is concerned, S’s intent must have priority. I will therefore argue that S’s intent, or pragmatic intent, possesses control over linguistic resources, which I will term a command of linguistic resources.

### 5. Closing remarks

While the definitions of pragmatics are diverse, S’s intent can be the key to pragmatics. S’s intent can go beyond the scope of abstract meaning or social conventions in order to realise itself. Without considering the role S’s intent plays in actual communication, it could be almost impossible to draw a line between pragmatics and its related fields.

It is equally important to note that pragmatics is prior to any other level of linguistic resources. Whenever S intends to realize S’s intent via language, S exercises S’s command of linguistic resources including intonation or sociolinguistic knowledge. This may be why pragmatic phenomena can be seen in almost every aspect of language.

I therefore define pragmatics as being concerned with S’s command of linguistic resources to realize S’s intent, and I basically restrict its scope to those cases where S’s intent is pragmatically marked.

### Note

This is a slightly revised and shortened version of Chapter III of an essay entitled: 'How a compromise can be reached between theoretical pragmatics and practical lexicography' submitted to University of Birmingham (November 2003) as part of my coursework. I should like to express my gratitude to my supervisors at University of Birmingham: Dr. Rosamund Moon and Professor Judith Lamie for their thorough and patient supervision throughout my writing of the original essay. Thanks are also due to my former supervisor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies: Professor Keizo Nomura who gave invaluable comments on the original essay. All errors that remain are my responsibility.

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