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What's under the big-tent pragmatics?

Defining Pragmatics offers a conceptual survey of the delimitation of pragmatics. We identify the problems that have plagued attempts to define the field. Such endeavors occupied pragmatists quite a lot in the 1970s and 1980s, but when no satisfactory solution was found, researchers simply settled into separate niches and practices of how to do pragmatics. Some, perhaps even most, pragmatists seem content with this state of affairs, where no coherent definition is available for pragmatics.¹ Many researchers don't venture out of the comfort of their pragmatic niches, limiting their interactions to fellow-believers. But these practical arrangements cannot serve as a foundation for a unified field of pragmatics, and the field stands to lose from such fragmentation. *Defining Pragmatics* offers as an alternative an integrated vision of the field, which provides a framework for communication among all practitioners of pragmatics on the basis of shared concerns with the role of pragmatics in clarifying fundamental questions of language.

This chapter provides the background and motivation for the book. We remind the reader how prevalent and how varied the issues currently considered pragmatic are in section 1.1. We then try to explain why and how pragmatics got to its current “big-tent” state (1.2). Section 1.3 outlines where *Defining Pragmatics* is headed.

1.1 A taste of big-tent pragmatics

This first section has a double function. First, by way of introduction, we remind the reader what kinds of questions researchers who are considered pragmatists address themselves to. The second goal is to impress upon the reader how important, prevalent, and varied so-called pragmatic phenomena are in human communication.

We seek meanings when we hear others speak. A very natural assumption is that we find these meanings in the very words the speaker uses. Here is a

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relatively “well-behaved” utterance, where all the information it conveys seems to be explicitly expressed by its words:

- (1) JOE: (H) Customer is Gerry and Pamela Tucker,
 (H) .. at sixty-one fifty-eight Main Street,
 in Hillside Illinois, (SBC: 014).

We seem not to need any prior context here. The customer(s) are introduced fully, as is their address. But utterances like (1) are hard to come by.² Here is a more typical piece of ordinary conversation, between a couple in bed (SBC: 005). As we see below, many of the meanings we get from (2) go well beyond the explicit words, and many of the principles governing the use of the linguistic expressions are not grammatical. These are pragmatic meanings and uses.

- (2) DARRYL: ..What does that have to do with heaven and hell
 in the book. a
 PAMELA: ... Well, b
 ... I'm just sort of reiterating. c
 ... I could read you some. d
 DARRYL: [No]. e
 PAMELA: [I] mean is that allowed? f
 DARRYL: ... No I I don't want to hear anything out of a book with, g
 .. chapter called heaven and hell. h
 PAMELA: You don't. i
 DARRYL: .. No. j
 PAMELA: Nkay. k
 Well then let's talk about [our vacation]. l
 DARRYL: [I'm gonna be] closed-minded about it. m
 PAMELA: (TSK) ... Oh dear. n
 (Hx) o
 DARRYL: (H) [But, p
 PAMELA: [That's hell]. q

There is obviously more going on here than meets the eye and ear. Which book (*the book* [2.a], *a book* [2.g]) does Darryl mean? What is the role of *well* (2.b)? What does it mean to be *sort of reiterating* (2.c)? What is the *some* that the ‘I’ could read (2.d)? How is Pamela’s response in (2.b–d) relevant to Darryl’s question in (2.a)? Why does Darryl say *no* (2.e)? Surely he cannot deny that Pamela is able to read to him. What does *that* (2.f; 2.g) refer to? Does Pamela mean that *I could read you some* means *is that allowed* (because she says *I mean* [2.f])? Who is *I* (e.g., 2.g)? What kind of *chapter* is intended (2.h), a book chapter? a local branch of a club? What activity is it that *you don't ...* (2.i)? Why is Pamela being uninformative in (2.i)? What is Darryl negating with his *no* (2.j)? It could not be the preceding *you don't*. What conversational function does *Nkay* have besides marking agreement (2.k)? Who are the ‘we’ of *our* (2.l)? Which *vacation* is referred to, the one they already had or the one Pamela wants to plan?

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What does it mean to be *closed-minded* (2.m)? What is Darryl hinting to Pamela in (2.m)? What is the conversational role of *oh dear* (2.n)? What is contrasted by *but* (2.p)? What does *hell* mean (2.q versus 2.a, h)? Pragmatics is expected to have all the answers (for these questions).

While Pamela and Darryl can answer the questions more fully, we too can answer many of them. To the extent that we are able to answer them, we too are said to have used our knowledge of pragmatics. We cannot answer the first question, because it requires reference to a prior text which we are missing, but, for example, we know that *some* (2.d) refers to ‘some parts of the book under discussion,’ even though it is not said so explicitly. We also know that Darryl’s *no* (2.j) is a repetition, which negates (2.d) and (2.f), even though they are not adjacent to (2.j). We understand that Darryl is hinting to Pamela that she has no chance of changing his mind about the book (2.m). Not all the answers we can actually put into words, however. For example, the role of *well* is not easily definable, but intuitively, we know that *well* (2.b) indicates that a dispreferred response is about to be issued: Pamela cannot easily and directly answer Darryl’s question. This is why her (2.b–d) are not relevant to his question. Pamela’s redundant (2.i) probably underscores her dissatisfaction with Darryl’s refusal in (2.g–h). The *Nkay* in (2.k) verifies that Pamela knows what is going on in the interaction (namely, Darryl’s refusal to go along with her proposal), at the same time marking a transition (a change of topic). *Oh dear* (2.n) indicates something like ‘trouble ahead,’ etc.

Although they seem to be a collection of unrelated questions, the answers, it has been claimed in the literature, all stem from our use of pragmatics. If so, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of the role of pragmatics in communication. Pragmatic analysis was involved in practically each Intonation Unit (indicated by separate lines) of the exchange. But what is it, exactly? Most broadly, pragmatics is said to analyze the relationship between grammatical products (most notably, sentences) and their extralinguistic contexts.

Extralinguistic context is crucial in language understanding in many different ways. First, it provides the background against which we understand the relevance of the speaker’s words. How does (2.c) constitute a relevant response to Darryl’s question in (2.a)? Apparently, Pamela is saying that what she was saying before (about things being the flip sides of other things – not here cited) are phrases she read in the book and is merely repeating them, unsure if she is applying those terms correctly. Second, the extragrammatical context also affects our understanding of the very words the speaker is using. Some linguistic expressions are just too general (e.g., *do*, 2.a), some are ambiguous (e.g., *chapter*, 2.h), others are vague or indeterminate (e.g., *anything*, 2.g, *some*, 2.d, *hell*, 2.q). Yet other words seem to be “missing,” even though the concepts they stand for are necessary for the interpretation of the sentence (e.g., *you don’t* [want to hear anything ...], 2.i). And because of the pervasiveness of polysemy, the meanings of all words need to be somewhat (differently) adjusted in each specific context: compare the concrete *with* in (2.g) with the abstract *with* in (2.a), as well as

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the subtle difference between the *abouts* in (2.l) and (2.m). The relation between *talk* and *our vacation* (2.l) is much more direct than the one between being *closed-minded* and *it* ('our vacation') (2.m). Indeed, different languages may cut this "aboutness" semantic field differently, using different prepositions for the two cases (e.g., Hebrew and French would use 'on' in (2.l) and 'regarding' in (2.m)). The following examples make much the same point using an open-class item, *market*:

- (3) a. JOE: ...mortgage, that (H) .. will be ... refinanced into the secondary **market** of Fannie Mae (SBC: 014).
 b. MARILYN: ..It's kind of smelly,
 ((part deleted))
 But I got it at a reputable **market** (SBC: 003).

Contextual cues help us perform these interpretations, and all linguistic phenomena that require such contextual support, or any reference to extragrammatical factors, are seen as pragmatically determined. It remains to be seen whether all references to the context are of the same (pragmatic) nature. Chapter 2 will be devoted to introducing many of the definitions of pragmatics, as well as prominent issues that have been discussed under the rubric of pragmatics. But first, let's try to understand how pragmatics got to be so heterogeneous, big-tent, as I call it.

1.2 How big-tent pragmatics was born

There's no doubt more than one way to survey the thematic landscape of the field of pragmatics within linguistics in the last thirty years or so. According to one, hopefully fruitful, outlook, the field of pragmatics can be compared to an unconsummated marriage between two partly estranged partners. For want of better terms, we may call the first partner the problem solvers and the second partner the border seekers. The problem solvers see their goal as accounting for phenomena that formal grammar very clearly cannot deal with. The border seekers' main goal is to draw a grammar/pragmatics division of labor as reflecting different cognitive capabilities. The interesting cases for them are those where grammar could potentially account for the data, but, they argue, it is better to let pragmatics handle them instead. While both partners pay lip service to the pragmatics marriage, to this day the field remains fragmented between radically different traditions of how one ought to do pragmatics. Ironically, the very canonical textbook on pragmatics, Levinson's *Pragmatics* (1983), testifies to the failure of the marriage. This section traces the problem of the incoherence of the field of pragmatics, so that we can outline a potential way out of it in the rest of the book. The story it tells comes with a moral.

In the beginning of the pragmatic turn within linguistics (the early 1970s) there was a set of orphaned linguistic facts, problems that needed to be solved. Meaning and use differences between syntactic alternatives, many pertaining to

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information-structure properties, were discovered, such as those distinguishing existential *there* sentences (*there is nothing alive in there* – LSAC) from basic existential sentences (*~nothing alive is in there*) (Kuno, 1971 [the ~ indicates an invented example]). The problem was that the syntactic alternatives concerned were considered semantic paraphrases. Indeed, the newly discovered meaning and use conditions had nothing to do with the truth-conditional content of the specific linguistic expressions. But they were real enough, and in need of an account. A group of generative linguists started worrying about how to account for these meanings, for the meanings seemed out of bounds for transformational grammar, as was. So were the illocutionary forces associated with performative verbs (Austin, 1962). Since interpretations and use conditions of this sort were considered important linguistic facts by the linguists pursuing them, an extension of generative grammar was sought. The first attempts were made by the generative semanticists, many of whom later turned functional pragmatists.³ The focus of these pragmatists was on problems that cannot be resolved within formal grammar, which makes no allowances for the communicative function served by natural language. Prominent linguists engaged in this type of research at the time were Charles Fillmore, Georgia Green, Jeanette Gundel, Susumu Kuno, George Lakoff, Robin Lakoff, Ellen Prince, Jerrold Sadock and Sandra Thompson. These are the original problem-solver pragmatists. We can call these early pragmatists the linguistic problem solvers, for their starting point was always formulated as a strictly linguistic puzzle.

More or less at the same time, but quite independently of the above research, Grice's "Logic and conversation" (Grice, 1975), a 1967 lecture, was rapidly gaining attention from many linguists. It didn't take long for linguists to endorse the Gricean program. Grice's original problem was the gap between natural language connectives such as *and*, *or* and *if then* and their logical counterparts. Since the natural expressions carried "extra" meanings that the logical operators didn't, the question was how to account for them. Grice did not want to divorce natural language connectives from their logical counterparts. He wanted the latter to provide the semantics of the expressions, so the question about the additional meanings was, should the gap be filled by some additional semantics or by something else? In searching for how to account for this gap, Grice realized that the problem ran much deeper. The gap between compositional linguistic meanings and actual interpretations within context, between the coded and the conveyed, permeates natural discourse and is not limited to a few linguistic expressions. Interpretations which are not directly associated with specific linguistic expressions are best viewed as inferences (particularized conversational implicatures). These are added onto linguistic meanings in the use of virtually any linguistic string, often when the speaker seems to be flouting one of the conversational maxims Grice proposed as governing human cooperative discourse (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner). Grice was the first to insist on the important role of inference in human communication. Particularized conversational implicatures were immediately recognized as a basic concept in pragmatics.

Conversational implicatures are cancelable, that is, their content may not actually be intended by the speaker. Cancellation can be explicit by adding some contradicting material, or implicit, by relying on the context to provide the relevant canceling information. Conversational implicatures are nondetachable, that is, given the literal meaning, the context and the Gricean maxims, they would have been generated no matter which wording had been chosen (except for manner implicatures). The meaning of the implicatures cannot affect the meaning of the “said” proposition. Implicatures are not semantically conveyed, on a par with the literal meaning, then. Their truth value may differ, so that the proposition may be true, while the implicature is false, for example. Conversational implicatures are calculable. Addressees must be able to work out the implicature (based on the literal meaning, the relevant context and the Gricean maxims). Last, implicatures may be indeterminate (to some extent), because there may be more than one way (i.e., more than one implicature) to justify why the speaker has flouted some maxim.

Note that these features of conversational implicatures are not independent of each other, and together they combine to define noncoded meaning. If the meaning of implicatures is not coded, it must be computable, or it will not be derivable at all. If it is computable, it must be nondetachable (given the same context, literal meaning and maxims). If implicatures are context dependent, they must be indeterminate to some extent, and moreover, they cannot be conventionally/semantically conveyed. Implicatures therefore do not affect the truth conditions of the proposition expressed, and they must be cancelable. Conversational implicatures are meanings derived in a nonarbitrary way, unlike linguistic meanings which are arbitrary for the most part. Indeed, they are derived by our rational capabilities, which are not specifically linguistic.

A semantics/pragmatics division of labor naturally suggests itself along these lines.⁴ Semantics on this approach consists of conventional, literal codes, pragmatics of context-based cancelable implicatures. The analyses initially proposed for a handful of natural language connectives can be extended to other linguistic expressions. Indeed, the application of the Gricean program to specific linguistic analyses was a boost to the developing field, and provided the second marriage partner, the border seekers. The relevant researchers at the time were first of all Laurence Horn (Horn, 1972 and onwards), Gazdar (1979), and more generally, the radical pragmatists (see the various papers in Cole, 1981). The idea here was that:

With heavy doses of Gricean pragmatics, a very great deal of grammar can be completely done away with by making supposedly arbitrary lexical and syntactic facts follow from a few general principles of conversation. As these psychological or sociological principles are independently required to account for nonlinguistic aspects of human behavior, the result is a genuine simplification of the total description of the way the forms of a particular language are used (Sadock, 1978: 285, emphasis added).

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Border-seeker pragmatists focus on the semantics/pragmatics distinction in general, as representing two different means for getting our messages across (the explicit versus the implicit), and on its implications for specific utterances and linguistic expressions in particular. The early pragmatists within this tradition launched a campaign to transfer various interpretations from semantics to pragmatics. This follows from Grice's "Modified Occam's Razor Principle," echoed in the quote above, which determined that assigning some putative interpretation pragmatic status is more economical than assigning it grammatical status. The grammar should specify only those aspects which are nonderivable by the (inferential) pragmatic theory. The Gricean pragmatists proposed that what seems to be grammatically complex (e.g., multiple semantic meanings) may actually be simple (unambiguous). The complexity is relegated to pragmatics, where it is shown to be naturally accounted for, and hence unproblematic after all.

The pragmatic analyses produced by problem-solver and border-seeker pragmatists are remarkably different. For problem-solver pragmatists the first step is the identification of a language-related puzzle (e.g., the nontruth-conditional meaning associated with some syntactic constructions, the performative interpretation of certain verbs) which grammar cannot account for. The second stage involves a search for some explanation to account for that puzzle. The approach has been bottom-up for the most part, researchers working their way from empirical questions tied to specific linguistic forms to analytic concepts. No specific theoretical toolkit was presupposed, but to count as pragmatic, the relevant explanations had to be defined in extralinguistic terms (e.g., Given or New information). Note that although this distinguished problem-solver pragmatists from the mainstream grammarians of the time, they themselves did not (initially) consider their analyses extragrammatical.⁵ The analyses were well within the code model of language. They all assume a speaker, an addressee and a code they share and symmetrically use to send and receive messages, except that the codes happen not to be truth-bearing elements. In other words, while the linguistic problem solvers saw the generative model as too restricted ("missing generalizations" in the jargon of the period), they did not question the basic assumption behind it, namely that every aspect of a communicated message is somehow coded. Another characteristic of problem solvers, and more so as time went by, is that their analyses have been based on natural discourse data for the most part.⁶

None of this is necessarily true of the border seekers. For them, Grice's innovative idea was that understanding language involves more than a code. What is communicated is not just the literal, encoded meaning. Quite a bit of meaning is inferred on top of that. And the literal and the inferred (implicated) require quite distinct cognitive mechanisms (decoding versus mind reading). Particularized conversational implicatures are generated under less constrained, nonlinguistic conventions. So, unlike the linguistic problem solvers, border seekers rejected the code model as the only model relevant for explicating utterance

interpretation (see especially Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995). The border seekers' agenda called for a top-down strategy for the most part. These linguists immediately saw in the Gricean program a way to draw a semantics/pragmatics division of labor.

For border seekers, the first step was the adoption of a theory, Grice's theory (others later), which equipped them with a rather specific toolkit for distinguishing between the conventional and the inferred. In the second stage, border seekers proceeded to seek out (specifically semantic) phenomena to apply the theory to (Morgan, 1978 is typical). Their data have usually been intuition based, and their goal was (and is) to establish some order (and border) between the semantic and the pragmatic, especially in cases where either grammar or pragmatics could in principle account for the use in question. Unlike the problem solvers' issues, which were clearly outside the grammar of the time, border seekers tackle interpretations which are not easily classifiable as pragmatic. As Levinson (2000: 261–262) notes, we don't always have intuitions as to what is grammatical and what is extragrammatical. For example, the various interpretations associated with *and* (e.g., the logical '^,' 'and then,' 'and therefore,' 'but') can be accounted for grammatically if *and* is assumed to be semantically ambiguous between these interpretations. But *and* can be (partly) pragmatically accounted for if we assume that it is semantically monosemic ('^') and in addition, pragmatically ambiguous. On this tradition, pragmatics is contrasted with semantics not only because of the analytic tools it employs (pragmatic inferences, rather than grammatical codes, for these linguists), but because pragmatic interpretations are an altogether different species cognitively. Semantics is part of grammar and involves a linguistic competence, pragmatics is extragrammatical, and builds on our general-purpose rational behavior.⁷ Border seekers often engage in "border skirmishes," i.e., controversies regarding the grammatical/pragmatic status of some use or interpretation.⁸ Carston (2002) and Horn (2006a) are recent examples for such research.

These rather divergent agendas did not stand in the way of the field of pragmatics becoming a smashing success, and quite instantly (although this is not necessarily reflected in mainstream linguistics journals). The first Berkeley Linguistics Society publication (*BLS*) (1975), for example, included twelve articles (41 percent) related to pragmatics, and one of them (Corum, 1975: 90) testified that: "Pragmatics is catching on with the speed of methadine bat. And, rightly so." That year's Chicago Linguistic Society (*CLS*) Parasession on functionalism and the *Speech Acts* volume of *Syntax and Semantics*, edited by Cole and Morgan (1975), followed by Cole (1978) best symbolize the birth of conscious pragmatic research within linguistics. With the publication of the *Journal of Pragmatics*, beginning in 1977, and Levinson (1983), pragmatics was widely acknowledged as an established discipline with its canonical textbook. Dillon *et al.* (1985: 446), reviewing Brown and Yule (1983), Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983) felt that "the appearance of these books reflects a period of assessment, consolidation, and institutionalization" for pragmatic research. By then,

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pragmatics was seen as a field which deals with regularities which are different in nature from grammatical regularities, using a different methodology. These, however, constitute a rather minimal common denominator for a field.

The problem-solver and the border-seeker approaches expanded over time, each becoming less homogeneous. Still, the basic difference between their agendas remains with us till today. In the border-seeker camp, in addition to classical Griceans, we now also find neo-Griceans such as Laurence Horn and Stephen Levinson, and Relevance theoreticians, such as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson and Robyn Carston. Philosophers such as François Recanati and Kent Bach have been active participants too. Naturally, there are differences between various schools of thought within the same camp. There are controversies over where the semantics/pragmatics borderline crosses for specific linguistic expressions (e.g., the numbers, scalar quantifiers, conventional implicatures). The agenda is no longer geared towards one-way transfers from the grammatical to the pragmatic. There is a question of how much should be relegated to semantics ('what is said'), even if pragmatics can account for certain interpretations. In general, Griceans advocate a bigger semantics than Relevance theoreticians, and Stanley (2000), a philosopher, proposes an even bigger semantics than others. There are differences as to how many and what types of pragmatic inferences we should assume: the neo-Griceans' arsenal includes conventional and generalized conversational implicatures in addition to particularized conversational implicatures; Relevance theoreticians doubt that we need the first two, but advocate the assumption of inferences which constitute part of the explicature (explicated inferences), i.e., inferences which contribute to the very proposition intended by the speaker.

But the border-seeker agenda has not changed since the late 1970s in one important respect, the one most relevant for this book. All border seekers remain "Gricean" in that:

The value of current pragmatic theory, as inspired by Grice's work, **lies mainly in the fact that it relieves semantics of a number of problems** for which it can provide a more general and explanatory treatment (Sperber and Wilson, 1981: 317, emphasis added).

And "pragmatics so conceived is relevant to linguistics because of the light it throws on the semantics/pragmatics interface" (Sperber and Wilson, 2005: 495). Border seekers are still pursuing a semantics/pragmatics division of labor, as applied to various linguistic expressions. Although they offer partly different criteria for such decisions, they all share the goal of deciding where the grammatical (semantics) ends and the extragrammatical (pragmatics) begins. This is the main importance of inferential pragmatics theories such as Grice's, neo-Grice's and Sperber and Wilson's for linguists, they argue. Hence, these different schools can and do engage in discourse and dispute with each other.

The same cannot be said about the second marriage partner, the problem solvers, whose goal is to offer theoretical analyses for issues that grammatical

theories have been found inadequate for. It seems that the dissatisfaction with the generative model in this camp has grown, driving researchers to explore newer territories outside the grammatical turf. The linguistic problem-solvers' approach to pragmatics, characteristic of the early functionalists, was rather quickly extended in very different directions, and the divergence of the later problem solvers from the early linguistic problem solvers has been much more radical. A rich array of research programs have sprung, all based on the rather vague truism that language is used for communication, and anything relevant to communication is part of pragmatics. Most importantly, whereas the early problem solvers set out from specifically linguistic puzzles, typically peculiarities of use which were unaccountable by grammar, later (nonlinguistic) problem solvers did not see themselves as bound by formally defined issues. Their research is not necessarily restricted to **coded** (but nontruth-conditional) meanings.

Consider the following humorous quote from Wierzbicka (1987: 111), criticizing the view that pragmatics should “relieve” semantics of issues it doesn't have to account for:

Somebody has to account for language use, but we linguists have now come to realize that we cannot do it. Fortunately, we don't have to feel guilty about it any longer. We see now that it is simply not our responsibility. Another science will do it: a science of human behavior in general ... We can concentrate on studying language structure. In fact, we can now say that it would be a mistake to confuse language structure with language use.

Nonlinguistic problem solvers did not share the grammarian's wish to be “relieved” of interpretations generated on the basis of pragmatic theories (implicatures or other species of meanings). They did not find that these interpretations were of no interest to the linguist, and should simply be moved out of the way. The Continental approach to pragmatics, especially, saw its goal as addressing any and all aspects relevant to language use, social and cultural ones included.

Such views have led to the perspective approach to pragmatics, where pragmatists deal with any phenomenon for which cognitive, social and/or cultural aspects are relevant. In fact, Continental pragmatists took upon themselves to analyze anything formal grammarians wouldn't deal with, psycholinguistics included. For example, Verschueren *et al.*'s *Handbook of Pragmatics* (1995: iv) declares that “For the purpose of this publication,” pragmatics is “defined briefly [and broadly in fact] as the cognitive, social, and cultural study of language and communication.” Under this definition, pragmatists study language from the user's point of view, pragmatics is seen as relevant to all linguistic components (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax), rather than complementing other linguistic components. Many of the articles in *Journal of Pragmatics* reflect this approach,⁹ and similarly, according to Andreas Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen's editorial statement, the goal of the recently founded *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* is to focus on historical aspects pertaining to the communicative