

Defining Pragmatics

Although there is no shortage of definitions for pragmatics (context dependence, nontruth conditionality, implicitness, etc.), the received wisdom is that “pragmatics” simply cannot be coherently defined. In this ground-breaking book Mira Ariel challenges the prominent definitions of pragmatics, as well as the widely held assumption that specific topics – implicatures, deixis, speech acts, politeness – naturally and uniformly belong on the pragmatics turf. She reconstitutes the field, defining grammar as a set of conventional codes, and pragmatics as a set of inferences, rationally derived. The book applies this division of labor between codes and inferences to many classical pragmatic phenomena, and even to phenomena considered “beyond pragmatics.” Surprisingly, although some of these turn out pragmatic, others actually turn out grammatical. Additional intriguing questions addressed in the book include: Why is it sometimes difficult to distinguish grammar from pragmatics? Why is there no grand design behind grammar nor behind pragmatics? Are all extragrammatical phenomena pragmatic?

Mira Ariel is a professor in the Linguistics Department at Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her recent publications include *Pragmatics and Grammar* (Cambridge, 2008).

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Defining Pragmatics

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*To my Ginat, Maya and Iddo,
with all my love*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Transcription conventions</i>	xvii
1 What’s under the big-tent pragmatics?	1
1.1 A taste of big-tent pragmatics	1
1.2 How big-tent pragmatics was born	4
1.3 Where <i>Defining Pragmatics</i> should take us	16
Part I Deconstructing pragmatics	
2 Surveying multiple-criterion definitions for pragmatics	23
2.1 Meaning criteria	24
2.1.1 Context dependence	24
2.1.2 Nontruth conditionality	28
2.1.3 Implicit and secondary	31
2.2 Analytic criteria	34
2.2.1 Discourse unit	34
2.2.2 Extragrammatical accounts	37
2.2.3 Acceptability judgments	42
2.2.4 Naturalness	43
2.3 Cognitive criteria	45
2.3.1 Performance	45
2.3.2 Right-hemisphere specialization	47
2.3.3 Inference	49
2.4 On the convergence between the different criteria	53
3 Problematicizing the criteria	56
3.1 Meaning criteria	57
3.1.1 Context dependence	57

x	Contents	
	3.1.2 Nontruth conditionality	60
	3.1.3 Implicit and secondary	64
3.2	Analytic criteria	67
	3.2.1 Discourse unit	68
	3.2.2 Extragrammatical accounts	73
	3.2.3 Acceptability judgments	75
	3.2.4 Naturalness	77
3.3	Cognitive criteria	80
	3.3.1 Performance	80
	3.3.2 Right-hemisphere specialization	83
	3.3.3 Inference	86
	Part II Reconstituting pragmatics	
4	Grammar as code, pragmatics as inference	93
	4.1 A definition of convenience: pragmatics as a list of canonized topics	93
	4.2 Grammar as code, pragmatics as inference	97
	4.3 What's behind grammar versus pragmatics?	104
	4.3.1 A Procrustean Bed: minimalistic 'what is said's	104
	4.3.2 The functions of the code/inference distinction	111
5	Inferential pragmatic theories	120
	5.1 Gricean principles	120
	5.2 Neo-Gricean principles	128
	5.3 Relevance Theory	135
	Part III Mapping the big tent	
6	The canon	149
	6.1 Deixis and reference	149
	6.2 Speech acts	152
	6.3 Meaning determination	154
	6.4 Presupposition	156
	6.5 Intonation	158
	6.6 Topicality and discourse structure	159
	6.7 Implicatures and explicated inferences	163
7	Functional syntax	169
	7.1 The added value of constructions	172
	7.2 Extragrammatical functions associated with constructions	174
	7.3 Encoded construction meanings	182
	7.4 Code, and inference too	193
	7.5 Complex form–function correlations	202
	7.5.1 What's the relevant construction?	202
	7.5.2 Code or inference?	205

Contents	xi
8 Beyond pragmatics	212
8.1 Politeness	213
8.2 Stance	216
8.3 Nonliteral references	219
8.4 Interactional patterns	219
8.5 Discourse styles	221
8.6 Sociolinguistic variation	221
8.7 Psycholinguistic phenomena	224
9 Many questions, some resolutions	230
9.1 Recapitulating the main argument	230
9.2 Why is it sometimes difficult to distinguish grammar from pragmatics, and what's the problem with Occam's Razor?	235
9.3 Why is there no grand design behind grammar and behind pragmatics?	242
9.4 Do we now have more grammar or more pragmatics?	247
9.5 Are all extragrammatical phenomena pragmatic?	248
9.6 What's the status of grammatical pragmatics?	256
9.6.1 An argument for a separate grammatical pragmatic status	261
9.6.2 An argument against a separate grammatical pragmatic status	264
9.7 Summary	271
<i>Notes</i>	275
<i>References</i>	293
<i>Index of names</i>	323
<i>Index of subjects</i>	329

Preface

If only linguistic expressions were well behaved. We would have a very neat picture of grammar versus pragmatics. Grammar would be restricted to the conventional which would simultaneously and necessarily also be context independent and truth conditional, and pragmatics would be nonconventional (inferential) and simultaneously and necessarily also context sensitive and nontruth conditional. As Recanati (2004b: 445) reminds us, however, “we can’t have it both ways” for either field. Semantics can’t always be both conventional and truth conditional, and pragmatics can’t always be both inferential and nontruth conditional. The same applies to other criteria proposed in the literature for distinguishing grammar and pragmatics. Recanati’s conclusion is that the grammar/pragmatics division of labor can be drawn absolutely only for prototypical cases. It must be stipulative for nonprototypical phenomena (such as conventional implicatures). Other linguists have applied the grammar/pragmatics division of labor inconsistently to make it work, adopting different criteria for different pragmatic questions (e.g., Horn and Ward, 2004). Many semanticists also simultaneously hold criteria which clash with one another for the complementary semantics, because they are reluctant to give up any one of them. Thus, even if context dependent, some phenomena count as semantic for some researchers, if they are truth conditional (Recanati, 2004b). Yet other linguists have given up on the grammar/pragmatics division of labor altogether. The grammar/pragmatics division of labor is in trouble. We here outline a solution for the definition dilemma.

The research survey in this book traces the history of the grammar/pragmatics divide, and reaches the conclusion, very much in line with Relevance Theory, that only a code versus inference distinction can serve as a solid basis for a grammar/pragmatics division of labor. Once this has been established, we can consistently apply this criterion, and this criterion alone, to a rich array of pragmatic topics in order to identify which aspects are indeed pragmatic. In following this procedure *Defining Pragmatics* is unique. Although pragmatists

have been quite aware of the definition problem for the field, textbook writers, starting with Levinson (1983) and ending with Huang (2007), as well as compilers of reference books on pragmatics (Horn and Ward, 2004; Kashner, 1998b) never followed through on their own conclusions that the field of pragmatics, as they themselves take it to be, cannot be based on a solid coherent definition. They each followed a well-trodden track where pragmatics was mechanically defined as a list of topics, each of which belongs in pragmatics, even if grammatical (encoded) aspects are crucially involved as well. Thus was born and institutionalized the big-tent pragmatics field. Relevance theoreticians, the only ones who have long advocated the code/inference distinction as a grammar/pragmatics divide and applied it consistently, have focused on a rather small subset of the topics considered pragmatic. We need to apply this distinction to the rest, and this is what *Defining Pragmatics* attempts to do. The importance of the book does not so much lie in the new findings and claims it offers, as in the systematicity and absolute consistency of the application of the “pragmatic method” of teasing codes from inferences, as well as the breadth of the topics subjected to this analysis, namely, canonical, noncanonical, and even “beyond pragmatic” topics.

The goal of this book is to deconstruct the field of pragmatics in its rather hollow, big-tent sense, and to demonstrate how it can be reconstituted on a solid division of labor between grammar and pragmatics. In order to do pragmatics we need an inferential pragmatics theory (such as Grice, 1989; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995), and we need to apply it to linguistic utterances, so as to determine where grammar ends and pragmatics begins. We must do it on the basis of natural-language data. The idea is that there is no pragmatic turf, with a predetermined set of topics that pragmatics has to include or exclude. Sociocultural phenomena, for example, often excluded from pragmatics (as well as from grammar) by stipulation in the Anglo-American tradition, should not automatically so be ruled out. Thus construed, the study of pragmatics combines insights from both semantics/pragmatics border-seeker pragmatists such as Horn (1972 and onwards), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and Carston (2002) and from problem-solver pragmatists (such as Hopper and Thompson, 1980; Kuno, 1971 and onwards; Prince, 1978a and onwards). A unified view of the field can thus be construed.

In the interest of brevity, an editorial decision has been taken to remove certain parts of the book from the printed version. These portions of the book appear as appendices named according to the section they belong to, and can be downloaded from www.cambridge.org/9780521732031. I indicate in the text which parts are missing (parts of Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 8). For example, additional material for section 3.1.1 appears under Appendix 3.1.1. Note that I often preface I, II, etc. to original example numbers repeated from previous chapters (I stands for Chapter 1, etc.).

Acknowledgments

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Transcription conventions

The following conventions are used in most of the transcribed examples in this book, i.e., those taken from conversations in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC). Transcriptions have been slightly simplified for ease of reading. For a more detailed discussion of these and other relevant transcription conventions, see Du Bois *et al.* (1992).

Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English

Symbol	Meaning
JILL:	speaker label
each intonation unit appears on a separate line. If the IU does not fit in one line, the next line is indented.	intonation unit
...	pause, medium or long (untimed)
..	pause, short (less than 0.2 seconds)
@	laugh (one symbol per pulse)
@you're @kidding	laughing words
[]	overlapping/simultaneous speech
[2]	overlapping speech (2nd pair)
.	final intonation
,	continuing intonation
?	appeal/question intonation
—	truncated intonation unit (em dash)
wor—	truncated/cut-off word (en dash)
(H)	breathe (in)
(Hx)	exhale
(TSK)	click (alveolar)
(COUGH)	vocalisms (various)
###	unintelligible (one symbol per syllable)

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
#you're #kidding	uncertain hearing of words
((WORDS))	transcriber comment

Note: In most cases, speaker names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Other symbols

- ?? Unacceptable string
- ~ Invented example

Other sources used

The Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC)

Lotan 1990: A Hebrew transcript of a conversation between an Israeli businessman and several income tax clerks (all males). Where the original Hebrew expressions are not crucial for the point being made, I only cite the English translations of the examples.