

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Natural pragmatics

A wagging tongue . . . proves to be only one part of a complex human act whose meaning must also be sought in the movement of the eyebrows and hand.

(Erving Goffman 1964, pp. 133–4)

INTRODUCTION

Sentences are rarely uttered in a behavioural vacuum. We colour and flavour our speech with a variety of natural vocal, facial and bodily gestures, which indicate our internal state by conveying attitudes to the propositions we express or information about our emotions or feelings. Though we may be aware of them, such behaviours are often beyond our conscious control: they are involuntary or spontaneous. Almost always, however, understanding an utterance depends to some degree on their interpretation. Often, they show us more about a person's mental/physical state than the words they accompany; sometimes, they replace words rather than merely accompany them.

The approach favoured by many linguists is to abstract away from such behaviours. Generative linguists sift out extraneous, paralinguistic or non-linguistic phenomena, and focus on the rule-based grammar – the *code* that constitutes language. This strategy has reaped rich rewards. Over the past thirty years linguists have suggested intriguing answers to the classical questions of language study (Chomsky 1986), and are now in a position to ask questions it was once not even possible to formulate (Chomsky 2000). Linguists working within functionalist frameworks (see, for example, Bolinger 1983) have addressed non-verbal communicative behaviours, as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

have some conversational and discourse analysts (Goodwin 1981, Brown and Yule 1983, Schiffrin 1994) and those looking at human interaction and communication from a more sociological or anthropological perspective (Garfinkel 1967, Goffmann 1964, Gumperz 1964, 1982, Hymes 1972). However, they do not seek to offer a cognitive explanation of the phenomena they describe. As with the work of generative linguists, distinctions important from a pragmatic view are sometimes left unexplored, and the question of how the natural properties of utterances might interact with the linguistic ones is largely ignored.

There are two main reasons why the pragmatist should cast a broader net. Firstly, thanks largely to the influential work of Paul Grice (1957, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1975, 1982, 1989),¹ it is now increasingly recognised that verbal communication is more than a simple coding–decoding process. Any attempt to characterise linguistic communication should reflect the fact that it is an intelligent, inferential activity involving the expression and recognition of *intentions*.² Secondly, the aim of a pragmatic theory is to explain how *utterances* – with all their linguistic and non-linguistic properties – are understood.

Consider the following examples:

- (1) Jack (yawning, and very pale, with dark patches under his eyes): I feel a little tired, but I'm OK, honestly . . .
- (2) **Ouch**, that flaming hurts! **Ow!** Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! (KCW 17 – BNC)³
- (3) Lily (to Jack, with a stern facial expression, in an angry tone of voice, gesturing furiously): You're **late!**
- (4) Jack (faking a smile, and lying): It's absolutely delicious, really . . .
- (5) [During the italicised section of the utterance the speaker performs an iconic gesture in which he appears to pull something down from the upper front space above him down towards his shoulder]: He grabs a big oak tree and *he bends it way back*.⁴

In all these examples, the non-verbal phenomena indicated will affect the way the utterance is understood: in (1), physical

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

manifestations of Jack's tiredness indicate to his audience that he is not anywhere near as well as he would like them to believe; in (2), the speaker's natural expressions of pain says as much as the words he utters; in (3) Lily's frown, her aggressive tone and her gestures will calibrate the degree of anger her audience takes her to be conveying; in (4), Jack fakes a natural behaviour – a smile – which indicates that he is being ironic, and means the opposite of what he has said; in (5), the speaker augments her spoken message with a natural iconic manual gesture which is integrated somehow into the interpretation of the utterance.

The task of describing and explaining precisely what is conveyed by these and all the non-verbal phenomena introduced above falls squarely within the domain of pragmatics. Despite this, natural pragmatics remains an under-explored discipline, and the central aim of this book is to redress the balance. The examples above suggest various generalisations. In the first place, it seems clear that non-verbal behaviours may contribute either to overt communication (speaker's meaning) or to more covert or accidental forms of information transmission (compare (3) above with (1)). This point is generally missed in the literature on non-verbal communication. In the second place, many such behaviours convey non-propositional information about mental states or attitudes (see example (2)), or alter the salience of linguistically possible interpretations, rather than expressing full propositions: as Jill House (1990) puts it – they form the 'packaging' rather than the 'content' of the message. Thirdly, such behaviours are integrated both with each other – facial expression, prosody and gesture are closely linked (see example (3)) – and with linguistic inputs during the comprehension process (see all examples).

The question of how the interpretation of such natural phenomena is to be accommodated within a cognitively oriented pragmatic theory provides what I hope will be a discernible thread throughout the book, and can be analysed into a number of more specific questions: (A) What is the relation between natural non-verbal behaviours and intentional communication? (B) How are non-verbal behaviours interpreted? (C) What do they convey? (D) What is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the relation between natural non-verbal behaviours and those non-verbal behaviours that are not natural?

The answers we provide to these questions will depend to a considerable extent on how we characterise notions such as *natural*, *language*, *pragmatics* and *communication*. Before providing an overview of the structure of the book, I will start with a few remarks about each of these.

Regarding the term ‘natural’, it should be clear from my opening paragraph that what I have in mind is to contrast natural phenomena, on the one hand, with human language, on the other. In a more general sense, of course, the human linguistic code is itself entirely ‘natural’ (hence, ‘human natural language’). This observation is central to the view of language adopted in this book: language is not ‘learned’, it ‘grows’ (Chomsky 1988, p. 134). Similarly, the most ‘natural’ response in a given communicative situation is more often than not a linguistic one; so just as language is natural in a certain sense, so is language use. Indeed, there is a sense in which – as Mary Catherine Bateson (1996, p. 10) puts it – ‘everything is natural; if it weren’t, it wouldn’t be. That’s *How Things Are*: natural.’ Even if we adopt an anti-Chomskyan stance and characterise language as an entirely cultural phenomenon, it is still natural in this general sense. As anthropologist Dan Sperber once suggested to me (personal communication): ‘everything that is – or at least everything that is in time and space – is natural, including all things cultural, artificial, etc.’

The notion of naturalness I have in mind is rather more specific. My concern is with phenomena that *mean* naturally, in the sense of Grice (1957): the antonym of the intended sense of ‘natural’, then, is not ‘unnatural’, but ‘non-natural’. For Grice, ‘means naturally’ is roughly synonymous with ‘naturally indicates’, so in the same way that black clouds might be said to mean that it will rain or spots mean someone has measles, Lily’s smile might be said to mean she is happy, or Jack’s frown to mean he is displeased. This kind of meaning can be clearly contrasted with the kind of meaning inherent in language (often described as arbitrary or conventional), which Grice called ‘non-natural’; so the word ‘pluie’ means ‘rain’;

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

‘Lily está feliz’ means ‘Lily is happy’, or what that remark meant was ‘Jack is displeased’. Here, linguistic meaning contrasts with natural meaning.

In this book, I will be focusing on a particular subset of phenomena that mean naturally. I will be mostly concerned with the kind of communicative behaviours or states alluded to in my opening paragraph: affective tone of voice, facial expressions, spontaneous expressions of emotion. In this subset I also include ‘natural’ gesticulation and manual gesture, with the (important) caveat that some gestures used in verbal communication are not natural in the sense I intend. The kind of gestures illustrated in Fig. 1.1 are cases in point.

All these gestures are highly conventionalised and culture-specific. The relationship between the gesture and what the gesture conveys is arbitrary, and the meaning conveyed ‘non-natural’ in Grice’s sense, rather than ‘natural’. However, to ignore this dimension of gestural behaviours would be to neglect a hugely important facet of the pragmatics of non-verbal communication. Similarly, the kind of ‘gestures’ put to use by signers as part of the various deaf sign-languages are not – in a crucial sense – ‘gestures’ at all: they are part of language, and would also fall on what Grice called the non-natural side of meaning.

It might be suggested that the above discussion could have been avoided by using the terms ‘paralinguistic’ or ‘non-linguistic’, rather than ‘natural’. I’m not convinced. For one thing, there is disagreement over what these terms mean. Some people treat ‘paralanguage’ as including only those vocal aspects of language use that are not strictly speaking part of language: intonation, stress, affective tone of voice, rate of speech, hesitation (if that can be considered vocal) etc. On this construal, facial expression and gesture are non-linguistic. Others treat the paralinguistic as including most or all of those aspects of linguistic communication that are not part of language *per se*, but are nonetheless somehow involved with the message or meaning a communicator conveys. On the first construal, while the set of paralinguistic phenomena intersects with the set of natural phenomena I am concerned with, there exist both

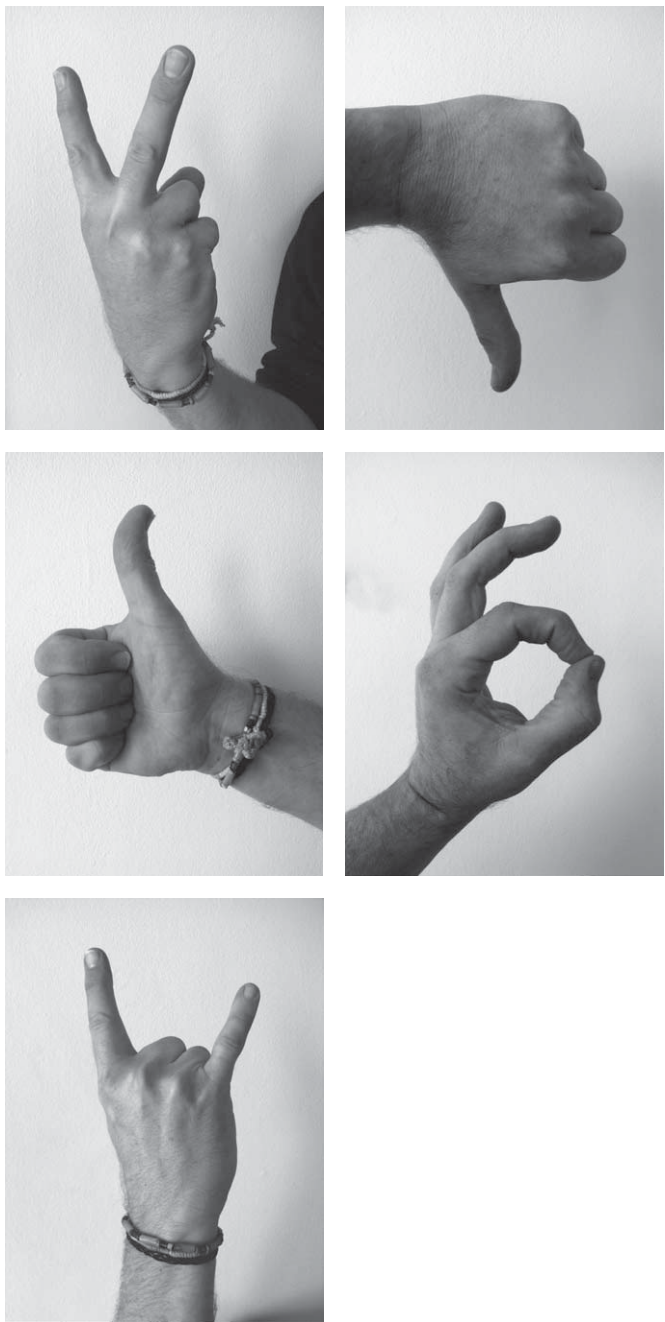


Fig. 1.1

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

paralinguistic phenomena that are not natural – deliberate frowns or fake smiles – and natural phenomena which might be co-opted for communicative use that I would not want to call paralinguistic on any conception – a bruise or a pale complexion, for example. In many ways, the second construal comes closer to what I have in mind; rising pitch is so often linked with rising eyebrows, for example, that it's perhaps not clear why we would want to say that while the former is part of a paralinguistic, the latter is not. However, the notions of 'natural' and 'non-natural' meaning have been the focus of much debate within the Gricean pragmatic tradition, and since many of my arguments are directly concerned with this tradition, I will stick with them.

Many of those who use (and define) the terms 'paralinguistic' and 'non-linguistic' seem content not to define *language* (assuming, perhaps, that it is easily definable, or that since we all have an intuitive handle on what language is, a definition is not needed). In what follows, I adopt a broadly Chomskyan view of language as an autonomous, mentally represented grammar constrained by innately determined principles. I realise that this view of language is not to everyone's taste. Indeed, I face opposition from both sides, for Chomsky himself may well regard the kind of enterprise on which I am embarking as a fruitless one (2000, pp. 19–74). For those who work within other linguistic paradigms, I hope that this book will shed light on the interaction between the natural and non-natural aspects of linguistic communication irrespective of our theoretical differences. This interaction seems to have been little remarked on within any linguistic framework, and is in need of addressing from all kinds of perspectives. For the Chomskyan paradigm, I hope that if, as Chomsky once remarked, 'It is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics' (2000, p. 132), some of the discussion in the chapters that follow might be of some value in clarifying the contribution of pragmatics.

The view of language I will adopt, then, is a cognitive, broadly Chomskyan one. Language is an Internal, Individual, Intensional object – Chomsky's *I-language*. Humans have a dedicated mental 'organ' or 'faculty of language' (2000, p. 168) – potentially a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

module (or set of modules). In a typically developing individual, this will mature, given exposure to the appropriate environment, from an initial genetically determined state to a ‘steady state’ that can be said to represent knowledge of language. To be in this state is to know a certain set of rules or principles: language is a principle-governed system. It is also a creative, combinatorial system with a finite number of elements (morphemes), which can be combined to create novel utterances of arbitrary length. The set of rules or principles a speaker of a language knows constitutes a mental grammar, a code pairing phonological and semantic representations of sentences. The view of language as an autonomous, innately constrained system fits well with the modular approach to mental architecture I take throughout the book, but my focus throughout will be on pragmatics and its interaction with language, rather than the nature of the linguistic system itself (for discussion of some of the general objections to the Chomskyan approach to language, see Chomsky 2000; for an overview of how a cognitive theory of pragmatics might fit in with broadly Chomskyan distinctions, see Carston 2002, pp. 1–14.).

Turning to *pragmatics*, my aim is to adopt a pragmatic theory that will provide an account of verbal communication – i.e. language use – that complements a broadly Chomskyan internalist or cognitive approach to language. For this reason, among others, I will adopt the framework of *Relevance Theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), which was inspired by Chomskyan (and Fodorian) insights into language and mind, and is in the same spirit as their work. Of course, not all pragmatists sympathise with relevance theory, just as not all linguists sympathise with Chomsky, but I hope the questions raised in this book will be of interest to those who work within other pragmatic frameworks.

Relevance theory combines Gricean intention-based pragmatics with aspects of modern research in cognitive science to provide a cognitive-inferential pragmatic framework. It takes as its domain a theoretically defined subset of cases that might in folk terminology be referred to as instances of communication. ‘Communication’ is a very broad term. As Thomas Sebeok remarks:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

all organic alliances presuppose a measure of communication: Protozoa interchange signals; an aggregate of cells becomes an organism by virtue of the fact that the component cells can influence one another. (1972, p. 39)

A pragmatic theory defined as a theory of communication in this very broad sense would indeed have to be what Chomsky (2000, p. 70) has termed a ‘theory of everything’; it would be required to encompass every possible facet of human interaction that might conceivably be said to be (in Sebeok’s terms) ‘communicative’; from the socio-cultural right down to the sub-personal: from fashion to pheromones.

Relevance theory has a more narrowly delimited domain. It is not a ‘theory of everything’; it is not even a general theory of communication, but focuses on a sub-type of human communicative behaviour: *ostensive* behaviour – behaviour by which a communicator provides evidence of an intention to communicate something. As noted above, language itself is seen as governed by a code which relates phonetic representations to semantic representations (or ‘logical forms’). However, utterance interpretation is a two-phase process. The linguistically encoded logical form which is the output of the mental grammar is simply a starting point for rich inferential processes guided by the expectation that speakers will conform to certain standards of communication. In (highly) intuitive terms, an audience faced with a piece of ostensive behaviour is entitled to assume that the communicator has a good reason for producing this particular stimulus as evidence not only of their intention to communicate, but of *what* they want to communicate. One of the objectives of this book will be to explain the interaction of ‘natural’ communicative phenomena and ostensive behaviour.

As well as meshing with the Chomskyan approach to language and cognition generally, relevance theory offers a framework within which the ‘vaguer’ aspects of human communication might be analysed. As Sperber and Wilson comment:

We see it as a major challenge for any account of human communication to give a precise description and explanation of its vaguer effects. Distinguishing meaning from communication, accepting that something can be communicated without strictly speaking being *meant* by the communicator or

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87097-9 - Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication

Tim Wharton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the communicator's behaviour, is a first essential step. . . . Once this step is taken, we believe that the framework we propose . . . can rise to this challenge. (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, pp. 57–8)

As noted above, natural behaviours such as prosody typically convey emotional or attitudinal information, or create impressions or moods rather than express full propositions in their own right. As a result, they fall into the class of communicative phenomena with 'vaguer effects'. Throughout the book, I will provide examples of how the theory might deal with such cases, and go some way towards showing that Sperber and Wilson's framework can rise to the 'challenge' they describe.

Finally, pragmatics is by its nature a cross-disciplinary subject, with its roots in philosophy and linguistics, but reaching out into cognitive science, psychology, sociology and even the study of non-human animal communication. I have done my best to make the book self-contained and self-explanatory, and to present the arguments in a non-technical way. I therefore hope that it will be of interest to the reader who is neither a pragmatist nor a linguist.

OVERVIEW

In Chapter 2 I approach question (A) above (what is the relation between 'natural' and intentional communication?) by focusing on Grice's seminal paper 'Meaning' (1957). This is one of the most influential philosophical papers of the past fifty years, and has had a profound influence on linguists, pragmatists and cognitive scientists as well as philosophers. In this paper, Grice drew a distinction between natural and non-natural meaning, and attempted to characterise non-natural meaning (meaning_{NN}) in terms of the expression and recognition of intentions. For Grice 'what is meant_{NN}' is roughly coextensive with what is intentionally communicated, and his notion of non-natural meaning has had a major influence on the development of pragmatics. The notion of natural meaning has received much less attention: I use it as a starting point for investigating the role of natural phenomena in communication.