

1 Introduction

The observation that language use quintessentially underlies the performance of actions, such as apologising, threatening, asserting, requesting, and so on, is neither controversial nor particularly ground-breaking in its own right. Even so, it has attracted an enormous amount of attention among scholars working not only in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science, but also in such diverse fields as literary criticism, social science, argumentation theory, artificial intelligence, and law studies. The main reason for this does not, of course, lie with the fact that people are capable of performing actions of this sort during verbal interaction, but rather with the explanatory power that the systematic analysis of speech acts – as these actions are customarily called – can be seen to carry with respect to fundamental epistemological questions about language, communication, or even normativity and action itself.

Given the amount of attention that speech act theory has received, it would be virtually impossible for any single treatise to cover the full breadth of perspectives that the relevant literature encompasses. The present work is no exception. In a nutshell, this Element constitutes an attempt to map the evolving relationship between speech act theory and theorising in pragmatics. Unsurprisingly, the starting point is that speech act theory is typically credited for having given birth to modern pragmatics as an independent field of enquiry; a point corroborated by the relevant literature pretty much in its entirety. As we will see, there are various important reasons – not only of conceptual, but also of historical nature – why this is so. In the first instance, though, it would be useful to justify the specific goals of the ensuing discussion. After all, speech acts feature prominently in virtually all textbooks, handbooks and encyclopaedias of pragmatics, so one might well protest that the literature already abounds with works of a similar scope.

In what is perhaps an unexpected twist, the main motivation behind this Element may actually have less to do with speech acts per se and more with the current state of theorising in pragmatics. As a look at most of the very same reference works alluded to just now attests, research in the field has been more or less anchored in two rather distinct schools of thought, which have been traditionally referred to as ‘Anglo-American’ and ‘Continental European’ pragmatics (see, e.g., Huang, 2010). Within this frame and since ‘many researchers don’t venture out of the comfort of their pragmatic niches, limiting their interactions to fellow-believers’ (Ariel, 2010: 1), most existing overviews of speech act theory in the pragmatics literature appear to adopt the positioning of

one of these two traditions (typically the Anglo-American one) from the get-go, without necessarily acknowledging the existence of the other.¹

At the same time, speech act theory has been recognised as both ‘the driving force behind the Anglo-American prominence in pragmatics’ (Verschueren, 2022: 4) and a ‘precursor’ (Culpeper 2021: 18) to sociopragmatics, a field of enquiry of central interest for the Continental European tradition that the Anglo-American one tends to ignore. This suggests that the study of speech acts is uniquely placed when it comes to appreciating the differences between these two traditions in the discipline. Given this, this Element will approach its subject matter with a view to disentangling the effect that the evolution of pragmatic theory has had on speech act theory itself and vice versa. By doing so, it will inevitably also go over some focal points in what Jucker (2024) calls the *first wave of philosophical approaches* to the study of speech acts, complementing them with insights from later work that has shed further light to our conceptual understanding of the topic at hand. In contrast to most existing overviews which give the impression of a more or less smooth transition to a contemporary state of the art, however, the discussion here will concentrate instead on some major differences that can be encountered in the exposition of the models that have shaped this understanding.

In view of its predominantly theoretical orientation, the present work should be seen as complementary to its sister Element, *Speech Acts: Discursive, Multimodal, Diachronic* (Jucker, 2024), which focuses more acutely on empirical research on speech acts. While some of the implications of such research will also inform the present discussion, the focus here is placed instead on the explanatory power of speech act theory with a view to highlighting its contribution towards contemporary theorising in pragmatics. To this end, this Element is organised as follows: Section 2 will offer an outline of the two aforementioned traditions in pragmatics which will guide the eventual discussion, while Section 3 will introduce the subsequent theoretical grounding of speech acts. Section 4 will concentrate on the inception of speech act theory through the seminal work of Austin, with Section 5 providing an overview of its contemporary received view, as this has been formed on the basis of further elaborations on this work in Searlean and Gricean terms. Section 6 will then present the argument that, due to the domination of the Anglo-American tradition in pragmatic theorising, this received view has actually departed substantially from Austin’s original vision, and Section 7 will showcase how the European-Continental alternative can help restore this vision. Finally, Section 8 will bring the discussion to a close with some brief concluding remarks.

¹ There are of course also notable exceptions to this trend, as in the case of Culpeper and Haugh (2014: Chapter 6) who address the topic from an *integrative* viewpoint that attempts to consolidate the two traditions.

2 Two Takes on the Scope of Pragmatics

In view of this Element's specific aim, it is necessary to start with a delineation of the scope of pragmatics, since it is within this scope that speech act theory will be considered here. Of course, as Levinson (1983: Chapter 1) masterfully showed in one of the first ever systematic overviews of the field some forty years ago, this is far from a simple task – even if one chooses to concentrate on a single take on the discipline, like Levinson did with the Anglo-American one. This situation might actually be even more complex nowadays, since, with the ever-increasing interest in the field, pragmatic research is currently being carried out from multiple different angles² with usually cross-cutting but sometimes also conflicting aims. As a result, there is still a very strong sense in which 'pragmatics means different things to different scholars' (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Sifianou, 2019: 93).

In the interest of keeping the present discussion succinct, I will have to concentrate on the conception of pragmatics put forward by the two broader schools of thought that were already identified in Section 1; something that should also be sufficient for the argument that I will eventually pursue. While doing so, however, I will refrain from referring to the relevant traditions using their aforementioned geographical labels. That is because, as Culpeper (2021: 15–16) rightly points out, these labels

perhaps give some vague indication of where practitioners of these views are located, but disguise the variety of views held within those locations and have nothing to say about some large swathes of the world that are 'big' in pragmatics, [...] yet are neither in Continental Europe, the United Kingdom or the United States.

Instead, for reasons that will immediately become clear, I will refer to the Anglo-American tradition as the 'component' view of pragmatics and the Continental European as the 'perspective' one (following Haberland & Mey, 1977; Verschueren, 1987), additionally distinguishing between them (after Bublitz & Norrick, 2011; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014) on the basis of the breadth that each of them allocates to the scope of the discipline.

2.1 The Narrow 'Component' View

In its narrow conception, pragmatics is viewed as a *component* of our ability for language, which is to be approached on par with the other core levels of

² For instance, apart from the integrative approach mentioned in footnote 1, one can choose to engage with pragmatics from a cognitive (e.g., Wilson & Sperber, 2004), socio-cognitive (e.g., Kecskes, 2010), discursive (e.g., Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024), or even variational (Schneider & Barron, 2008), inter-cultural (Kecskes, 2014) or cross-cultural (e.g., House & Kádár, 2021) angle, among several others.

linguistic analysis; that is, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and – more crucially, of course – semantics. In this picture, the focus of enquiry for pragmatics falls on the ways in which contexts of utterance can be seen to perform certain functions that complement the output of other performance systems, whose knowledge basis underlies our linguistic competence; most notably semantic interpretation, but, on occasion, morphosyntactic parsing and phonological processing too.

By and large, this view is closely linked to the mainstream way of looking at meaning in language as a function of the truth-conditional content of sentences,³ allowing for contextual considerations to enter the picture only when necessary. From this angle, pragmatics falls under the scope of linguistic enquiry only insofar as contextual information can be shown to directly affect the semantic interpretation of sentences, like, for example, in the case of reference assignment (especially to indexicals) or disambiguation; hence its resulting characterisation as *narrow*. Indeed, even though he did advise some caution when it comes to blindly adopting this viewpoint, Levinson (1983: 32) concluded his aforementioned overview of the field's scope characterising as 'most promising' those 'definitions that equate pragmatics with "meaning minus semantics"' or with a theory of language understanding that takes context into account, in order to complement the contribution that semantics makes to meaning'. Following suit, work that adopts the component orientation has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on a handful of phenomena (including, naturally, speech acts) which cannot be accounted for with resort to semantic theory alone.

This essentially 'pick-and-choose' outlook was even more evident during the early days, right before the recognition of pragmatics as a discipline in its own right. In fact, the haphazard way in which scholars would use the label 'pragmatic' back then was what famously prompted Bar-Hillel (1971: 405) to refer to pragmatics as a 'wastebasket' for linguistic phenomena which appear to not fit 'syntactico-semantic theory' and, at the same time, underline the need to 'bring some order into the contents of this wastebasket' by 'clarify[ing] somewhat better the explicandum [...] before embarking on the explication'. Understandably, such an undertaking would be neither straightforward nor easy, especially since 'an "after the fact" definition, when the set of pragmatic topics had already been relatively well established, is basically a mission impossible' (Ariel, 2010:16). As it happens though, a way of bringing this

³ It is worth noting here that this outlook is firmly rooted in the tradition of formal semantics which focuses on the study of linguistic meaning in non-mentalistic terms. Even from a mentalistic viewpoint though, pragmatics is again typically viewed as an 'add-on' to semantics, conceived of this time as a 'performance theory at the semantic level' (Katz, 1977: 15).

much-needed conceptual order was already brewing, owing primarily to the collective work of Grice (1989).

Around the same time that Bar-Hillel coined the wastebasket metaphor, Grice was already developing his theory of implicature, with the express aim of accounting for the divergences in meaning that were often assumed to exist between formal devices in logic and their natural language counterparts (see, in particular, Grice, 1975). Needless to say, implicature instantly became a staple of pragmatic theory, and for good reason: not only did it help safeguard the purity of the logical approach, by allowing for a (non-truth-conditional) description of aspects of linguistic meaning that were clearly unfit for formal semantic accounts, as in the case of conventional implicatures; it also provided a principled way of explaining how contexts of utterance prototypically allow language users to communicate inferences that go beyond the standing linguistic meaning of sentences, and are thus correspondingly pragmatic in nature, as in the case of conversational implicatures.

In effect, along with the notion of a speech act, to which we will return shortly, this latter contribution of Grice also helped extend the scope of pragmatics in its narrow conception beyond its most immediate ‘add-on to semantics’ role. By including in the picture further inferences, especially implicatures of the particularised conversational kind, which may require linguistic meaning in order to be worked out but are still quintessentially context-driven, it drew even more attention to the study of communicated meaning. More importantly though, when it comes to the delineation of the scope of pragmatics, in developing his approach, Grice offered an ingenious solution to the aforementioned wastebasket problem. Complementing his earlier account of *nonnatural meaning* (Grice, 1957; for a brief exposition, see Section 5.3), the philosopher’s theory of implicature pretty much solidified the field’s emphasis on the intentions of the speaker. Adopting the Gricean rationale, research on the various distinct phenomena that, by that time, would have been taken to fall under pragmatics could now be seen to converge towards a common goal: the identification of the meaning that speakers intend to communicate to hearers when producing utterances, or as this ended up being commonly referred to, the identification of *speaker meaning*.

Overall, for scholars adopting the narrow view of the discipline, the notion of speaker meaning allowed for a clarification, as well as restriction, of the field’s scope. Obviously, the interpretation of any utterance can give rise to a whole host of meaning-related inferences whose origin can be attributed to the utterance’s context of production (see, e.g., Elder, 2024), but only some of those inferences are directly linked to (or derived from) the linguistic content of an utterance’s underlying sentence – that is, the linguistic structure that the speaker chose to

token on this specific occasion. Delimiting the focus of attention to just those contextual inferences that have been communicated *properly* – that is, by virtue of the speaker overtly inviting the hearer to draw them – would be deemed sufficient for recovering those aspects of meaning that are needed to complement the picture captured by semantic theory. As a result, with Grice's insight, the study of pragmatics in its narrow conception could finally be seen to have both a clear-cut object of investigation under the rubric of speaker meaning and a tightly knit domain of application, that of intentional verbal communication.

2.2 The Broad 'Perspective' View

As we just saw, the earliest adoptions of a pragmatic outlook for the study of language involved the operationalisation of contextual information in order to explain certain phenomena that would not fit existing semantic and syntactic accounts. Going back to the very coinage of the term 'pragmatics', however, it is easy to see that the discipline was not originally conceived of along such lines. Upon introducing the term in his seminal semiotic account, Morris (1938: 6–7) defined pragmatics as the 'study of the relation of signs to interpreters', distinguishing it from semantics and syntactics, which respectively study 'the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable' and 'the formal relation of signs to one another'. From this angle, pragmatics was expected to deal with 'the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs' (Morris, 1938: 30); clearly a much broader role than the one that would eventually be granted to it by the narrow pragmatics camp.

Against this backdrop, much like the narrow conception of pragmatics emerged out of a need to consolidate the scope of existing linguistic research, the broad one developed as a reaction to the way linguistic pragmatics was evolving at the time. On the occasion of launching the *Journal of Pragmatics* and in what is generally considered as the first explicit defence of the broad take on the discipline, Haberland and Mey (1977: 5) took issue with the overwhelming preoccupation of their contemporaries with 'formal pragmatics (mostly in the Montague tradition)', which they suggested may well be thought of as 'an extremely sophisticated way of doing semantics' given its complete disregard of socio-cultural considerations. According to them, since 'language, as *the* means of societal communication, is transmitted in a social setting', the human capacity for language 'cannot be studied and/or measured in the abstract' and without reference 'to the societal conditions that language learners and users live by' (Haberland & Mey, 1977: 9–10; emphasis in original). Then, drawing inspiration from Morris' original vision, and more specifically from his suggestion that

pragmatic rules are to ‘state the conditions in the interpreters under which the sign vehicle [in our case, some linguistic token] is a sign [i.e. meaningful]’ (Morris, 1938: 35), they attributed to pragmatics the role of ‘inquiring into the necessary conditions that govern the use of language’ (Haberland & Mey, 1977: 6).

From then on, pragmatics would additionally be conceptualised of as a *perspective* for studying language – or, as Verschueren (2022: 14) has correspondingly put it, a ‘perspective on whatever phonologists, morphologists, syntacticians, semanticists, psycholinguists, sociolinguists, etc. deal with’, rather than a separate component that complements other levels of linguistic analysis. Perhaps more pertinently in view of the present discussion, embracing pragmatics ‘as a general functional perspective on (any aspect of) language’ essentially meant adopting ‘an approach to language which takes into account the full complexity of its cognitive, social, and cultural (i.e., “meaningful”) functioning in the lives of human beings’ (Verschueren, 2022: 17). Given this, apart from casting a much wider net in relation to the positioning of pragmatics vis-à-vis linguistic theory, the perspective view is also deemed *broad* because it significantly extends the discipline’s remit, allowing for the inclusion of multiple phenomena over and above those that the component pragmatics tradition has typically concentrated on. For instance, being generally content with delimiting their research to the domain of intentional verbal communication, the narrow-view camp has tended to disregard aspects of meaning that are not tied to speaker intentions, with ‘phenomena like politeness, face-saving and turn taking’ often being excluded from the remit of pragmatic analysis on the grounds that their inclusion would conflate distinct aims as to what the discipline is about (Blakemore, 1992: 47–48). By reinstating socio-cultural considerations at the centre of its agenda, the broad take on pragmatics has allowed for a ‘boundless diversification’ (Verschueren, 2022: 9) in the field. As a result, a significant amount of research that does not prioritise formal analysis nor concentrates specifically on the study of speaker meaning has managed to additionally flourish therein.⁴

In this picture, when it comes to the role of speaker intentions for the study of pragmatics, the perspective view casts doubt not only on their adequacy as

⁴ On this point, an anonymous reviewer noted that the main reason why phenomena related to socio-cultural (or interactional) considerations are nowadays thought of as pragmatically-oriented, rather than simply applied, is the existence of approaches which use traditional concepts – like implicature – to explain them, as this proves unequivocally that they share something with phenomena traditionally considered to be part of pragmatics *proper*. If anything, considering also of this Element’s overall aim, the observation that (many) pragmaticists would be willing to accept a topic as ‘pragmatic’ only if it can be somehow linked to the (theoretical concepts put forward for the) study of speaker meaning provides an additional indication of the firm grip that, as I will argue in Section 6, the narrow take on pragmatics has had on the mainstream conceptualisation of the discipline.