In this chapter, we introduce the subject of pragmatics and cover some basic concepts, definitions, and topics that will be central to the ideas discussed in the rest of the book. We begin with some definitions of pragmatics, and a key distinction is made between those approaches which focus on social factors, and those which take a more theoretical approach. The latter will be the focus of this book. We suggest some questions that might be of interest to those working in theoretical pragmatics. Next, we move on to think about the role that context plays in interpretation. This leads us to a key distinction between sentences and utterances, with utterances as the focus of pragmatics. We then consider two different ways in which meaning may be communicated: via code and via inference. As we will see, inference plays a central role in the interpretation of utterances. Next, we discuss the idea that the identification of intention lies at the heart of utterance interpretation. This leads to a discussion of the cognitive abilities that are thought to underlie inferential processes of this sort: mindreading, metarepresentation, and theory of mind. We look at what it means to be able to have thoughts about other people’s thoughts and why this is key for pragmatic processing. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the topics that will be covered in the rest of the book.

1.1 What Is Pragmatics? Some Definitions
1.2 Communicating in a Context
1.3 Sentences and Utterances
1.4 Code and Inference
1.5 Pragmatics and Intentions
1.6 Mindreading and Metarepresentation
1.7 Organisation of the Book
1.8 Chapter Summary
Exercises, Key Terms, and Further Reading
1 What Is Pragmatics?

1.1 What Is Pragmatics? Some Definitions

Language is a uniquely human communicative tool. We use it in almost every aspect of our lives. From communicating basic survival needs, to expressing emotions, to discussing complex philosophical issues and abstract notions, we use language to convey meaning. Therefore, the study of language must involve the study of meaning. It is standard to recognise two subfields in the study of meaning: **semantics** and **pragmatics**. Where the line between the two is drawn is a matter of – often heated – debate, and we will explore some of the issues related to this debate in the chapters of this book. However, broadly speaking, we can understand the difference by thinking about the role that is played by **context**. Semantics is concerned with the meaning of a linguistic expression independent of the context in which it is used. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is the study of how meaning is produced and understood in context. Work in pragmatics focuses on what a particular speaker means when she utters a particular linguistic expression on a particular occasion.¹ Table 1.1 provides some further definitions from a selection of sources.

### Table 1.1 Definitions of pragmatics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Source/Reference</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics studies language in context and the influence of situation on meaning</td>
<td>Fromkin (2000, p. 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics is concerned with the interpretation of linguistic meaning in context</td>
<td>Fromkin and Rodman (1998, p. 190)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics: the study of speaker meaning and how more is communicated than is said</td>
<td>Yule (2010, p. 292)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics is often described as the study of language use, as opposed to language structure</td>
<td>Wilson and Sperber (2012, p. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Pragmatics] is concerned with ’meaning in context’</td>
<td>Chapman (2011, p. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding</td>
<td>Levinson (1983, p. 21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Throughout this book, as in other pragmatics literature, I will follow the convention of referring to the speaker as *she* and the hearer as *he*. This is for ease of explanation and has no further significance.
1.1 What Is Pragmatics? Some Definitions

While there are some differences in these definitions, some commonalities also emerge, with the notion of context playing a central role. Pragmatics is concerned with the aspects of interpretation that are affected by context, and those working in pragmatics ask questions about the influence that context has on what a speaker is understood to have communicated. Another common theme that emerges from these definitions is a focus on language in use. Language, of course, is always used in a context.

When we consider pragmatics as a field of study, we find some differences of opinion with regard to how it fits into the wider picture of communication and linguistics. For some, pragmatics is a key area in the study of language, and without a theory of pragmatics, we cannot fully understand how language is used to convey meaning. For others, pragmatics sits outside of linguistics proper and, indeed, may even be thought of as a ‘wastebasket’ for anything that is not worthy of scientific study.

We find a wide range of phenomena and concerns discussed under the umbrella of pragmatics. Some of these align closely with issues from the philosophy of language, while others are, perhaps, more connected with sociolinguistics and intercultural communication. In this book, I follow Chapman (2011) in recognising a rough distinction between two broad areas of pragmatics. Chapman refers to these areas as ‘theoretical pragmatics’ and ‘social pragmatics’. Both are concerned with the influence that context has on interpretation, and both focus on language in use. However, they approach the topic from different perspectives and focus on different data and different issues. Social pragmatics tends to focus on examples of naturally occurring discourse and seeks to analyse conversations and interactions in terms of social and cultural factors. Theoretical pragmatics, on the other hand, focuses on how words, expressions, and sentences are used to convey meaning in different discourse contexts, and on how hearers go about interpreting language in these contexts.

These two approaches are, of course, complementary. Work on naturally occurring data and interactions informs the development of theories, and theoretical work underpins the analysis of naturally occurring data. In this book, we focus on theoretical pragmatics, and we look at a range of frameworks and approaches for analysing how language is used and understood in context. While social and cultural factors inevitably play a role in the interpretation of specific utterances in specific contexts, the focus here will be on the general processes that underlie these interpretations. The following is a non-exhaustive list of the types of questions that those working in theoretical pragmatics might attempt to answer.
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- Are we born with pragmatic abilities, or do we learn them?
- How do hearers disambiguate between ambiguous words?
- How do we assign reference?
- How does irony work?
- Why do we use figurative and non-literal language, and how do these convey meaning?
- Why do misunderstandings occur between people who speak the same language?
- Why are puns funny?
- How do words convey different meanings in different contexts?
- How do we use language to make promises, threats, and bets?
- What is the point of small talk?

We will return to many of these questions in later sections of this book, and we will discuss some possible answers that have been proposed. In the rest of this chapter, we lay the groundwork for what follows with an overview of the key ideas and concepts that underlie the field of pragmatics.

1.2 Communicating in a Context

When we communicate, we make choices. We make choices about the specific words that we use, the order in which we use them, and the way in which we say or write them. Some of these choices are constrained by the grammar of the language. For example, in English, subjects come before the verb, and objects come after it. However, many of the choices that we make are not driven by the grammar, but by subtle differences or nuances in what we want to communicate or how we want to communicate it.

There is very rarely, if ever, only one way in which we can convey any particular message to an intended audience. We usually have options. Consider, for example, the contrast between the use of the active and passive voice in (1) and (2), respectively.

(1) We made mistakes
(2) Mistakes were made

Both (1) and (2) conform to the grammar of English and both could be used to describe the same situation. However, a speaker’s choice between the two will be driven by the context in which she is speaking and by subtleties in what she wants and intends to communicate.

When we speak, we also make decisions about how formal, how direct, and how polite our utterances will be. Consider the various ways in which
1.2 Communicating in a Context

You could ask someone to open a window, for example. Some possibilities are given in (3) to (5). There are, of course, many more.

(3) Open the window!
(4) Would you be so kind as to open the window?
(5) It’s getting a bit stuffy in here, isn’t it?

The utterance in (3) is the most direct, and, perhaps, the least polite. The request in (4) does not directly ask the hearer to open the window, but rather queries his willingness to do so. As a consequence, it is likely to be perceived as more polite. The utterance in (5) makes no reference to the window at all. However, in certain contexts it is likely to be interpreted as an indirect request that a window be opened.

The choice between direct and indirect requests is not driven by requirements in the grammar of the language. All these examples are grammatical English sentences. Rather, the choice between them is driven by the speaker’s communicative intentions and will have been influenced by the context in which she is speaking. The choices that we make often have a lot to do with the social context in which we are speaking, with our relationship with our interlocutors, and with the overall message that we are trying to communicate. This overall message will often go beyond the literal meaning of the words that we use, and it may include information about our emotions and attitudes. It will also include everything that we want to hint, imply, or suggest. Furthermore, successful interpretation of our message will usually depend on the hearer having access to specific contextual information. The overall message that is communicated depends on the context in which the utterance is produced.

Pragmatics is the study of the context-sensitive decisions that speakers make, and it is the study of the effects that these decisions have on what is communicated. Some studies in pragmatics, for example, ask questions about what drives a speaker to choose one possible option over another, and they consider what this reveals about the speaker’s intended meaning. Other studies may focus more on the hearer’s perspective and will ask questions about how a speaker’s choices affect interpretation. Pragmatics, as a field, is concerned with everything that is communicated by an utterance beyond the literal, encoded meanings of the words that are used.

Speakers will often say one thing but imply something else or something extra. We have already seen this in the indirect request in (5). The speaker has said that the room is getting a bit stuffy, but she has implied that she would like the window to be opened. We can also see this indirect use of language in Zelda’s reply to Celia’s question in (6).
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(6) Celia: Did you enjoy dinner last night?
Zelda: I don’t like Italian food

Zelda has replied to Celia’s question, not by stating whether she enjoyed dinner, but by making a statement about her dislike of Italian food. If we only have access to the information that Zelda gives directly in her reply, then we cannot know for sure whether the answer to Celia’s question is yes or no. However, we can go beyond what she has stated and relate the contents of her utterance to the context in which she is speaking to work out what she means by what she has said. We are likely to conclude that Zelda did not enjoy dinner last night. Furthermore, we are likely to conclude that this was because the food at the dinner was Italian, which we now know Zelda does not like.

We can only work out these two conclusions by thinking about the context in which the utterance was produced. In this case, it was produced as an answer to a specific question. However, Zelda could have uttered the same words in any number of other contexts, and while the basic statement would have remained more or less the same, the implied meaning would be different. Consider, for example, that Celia had asked a different question, as in example (7).

(7) Celia: Shall we order a pizza for dinner?
Zelda: I don’t like Italian food

Now Zelda is making the same statement, but because the context is different, her answer implies something else. In this case, she implies that she does not think they should order a pizza for dinner.

Next consider (8).

(8) Celia: What do you think of my new Christmas jumper?
Zelda: (Ironically) Oh it’s lovely. Very understated!

Here Zelda answers Celia’s question ironically. The statement that she makes is seemingly the opposite of what she really means to communicate. The jumper is anything but understated, and Zelda not only implies that she does not think much of Celia’s jumper, but she also communicates something more about her general attitude towards it, and perhaps even about her attitude towards Celia herself. Again, we see that to understand what a speaker means, we must go beyond what they have said. We discuss irony in more detail in Chapter 8.

Pragmatics, as a field of enquiry, seeks to understand how we go beyond what has been literally and directly said by a speaker to work out what the speaker meant to communicate by producing a particular utterance in a particular context. Whenever we communicate with someone, we must
take the context into consideration. When we study language and language use, whether we are focused on production or interpretation, we need to understand how speakers and hearers communicate in a context. Pragmatics is the study of the choices we make when we speak, write, or sign, and how these affect the interpretation of meaning. Without an understanding of pragmatic processes, we do not have a full understanding of how we communicate. In this book, we discuss some of the key topics in the study of pragmatics. To do this we first need to outline some underlying ideas and assumptions and define some key terms and vocabulary.

### 1.3 Sentences and Utterances

Outside the realms of linguistics and pragmatics, the term *sentence* is far more commonly used than the word *utterance*. For example, an exam paper might instruct us to provide our answers in full sentences, or a university student might be advised to use shorter sentences in their essays. While reading the previous section, you might, therefore, have been surprised to find the word *utterance* used where, perhaps, you might have expected to find the word *sentence*. In pragmatics, we make an important distinction between these two terms. Pragmatics is the study of utterance interpretation. What, then, do we mean by an utterance, and why do we need to distinguish between sentences and utterances in this way?

The grammar of a language generates sentences. The strings of words in (9) to (11) are grammatical sentences of English, as are, I hope, most of the sentences in this book.

(9) She looked happy
(10) I don’t watch nonsense
(11) It’s too hot

Sentences have syntactic and semantic properties. For example, the sentence in (9) is formed of the feminine singular pronoun (*she*), followed by a verb in the past tense (*looked*) and an adjective (*happy*). These three lexical items have been put together in a way that obeys the syntactic rules of English. The syntactic properties of the sentence are specified by the grammar of English and are independent of any context. This gives us the *sentence meaning*.

Any competent speaker of English will have access to the sentence meaning of the linguistic sequences in (9) to (11). While the semantic and syntactic properties of a sentence determine the sentence meaning, a sentence itself does
1 What Is Pragmatics?

not express a proposition. A proposition can be thought of as a representation of a state of affairs, and a proposition can be either true or false. Notice, that, even though we understand the sentence meaning of the examples in (9) to (11), we cannot say whether they are true or false without further information. Sentences only express propositions when they are used by speakers in a particular discourse context and with a particular intended meaning. When a sentence is used by a speaker to communicate a proposition, we say that it is an utterance. We assess whether a speaker has said something true or false on the basis of what is known as the proposition expressed. The proposition expressed is the thought that has been explicitly communicated by the speaker. We return to this notion in more detail in Chapter 2.

Consider example (9) again. To work out the proposition that the speaker intended to express when she produced this string of words, we need to go beyond the context-independent sentence meaning. We need to consider a variety of contextual factors. Who is the speaker? When and where is she speaking, and perhaps, most crucially, what is she intending to communicate? Imagine that (9) is uttered by Pauline as an answer to Gemma’s question in (12).

(12) Gemma: Did Luisa get the job?
    Pauline: She looked happy

In (12) the sentence from (9) has been uttered by Pauline to express a particular proposition. In this case, it expresses the proposition that Luisa looked happy. Notice that, unlike the sentence in (9), Pauline’s utterance in (12) can be either true or false. Her utterance is true if Luisa looked happy, and it is false if Luisa did not look happy. Also notice that the meaning of Pauline’s utterance in (12) is not exhausted by the sentence meaning or by the proposition that it is used to express. It is reasonable to assume that Pauline intended her utterance in (12) to also communicate that she thinks that Luisa got the job. Again, this implied meaning depends on the context. It would be impossible to reach this conclusion about what Pauline means without knowledge of the context. However, if we do not reach this conclusion and we do not assume that Luisa (as far as Pauline knows) got the job, then we have not fully grasped Pauline’s intended overall meaning.

Any one sentence may be used to express different propositions when used in different contexts and with different intended meanings. In each case, we have a different utterance. If, instead of asking about Luisa, Gemma had asked about Jessica in (12), the same sentence, uttered as a reply, would have expressed a different proposition (the proposition that Jessica looked happy) and it would also have implied something different (that Pauline thinks that Jessica got the job).
Pragmatics is concerned with the interpretation of utterances. The marks on this page are written utterances. When you speak or sign, in whatever language, you are producing utterances. Utterances happen. They are acts of communication. They are spoken, heard, written, or read. Sentences, on the other hand, are abstract. They are objects of study and analysis, rather than tools of communication. When a sentence is produced in a context, we create an utterance. It is utterances that are used to communicate meaning, and utterances are always context dependent.

Finally, while we usually talk about utterances as uses of sentences, they need not take the form of a full, grammatical sentence. The examples in (13) to (15) might not technically be sentences in a prescriptive, grammatical sense as they lack a verb. However, if they are used in a context to convey a particular meaning, we say that they are utterances.

(13) Over there
(14) Finally
(15) Of course

Accessing sentence meaning is a matter of decoding linguistic signals. However, to derive utterance meaning, we must also perform inferences. We consider the differences between these two processes in the next section.

1.4 Code and Inference

One way of communicating information is to use a code. A code is a system where a particular signal always communicates the same message. A particular input always results in the same output. Information can be transferred because the person (or the computer) transmitting the information has access to the same coding system as the person (or the computer) who is receiving it. Traffic signals are codes, for example. Everyone using the roads knows that a red light is the agreed signal for stop and a green light is the agreed signal for go. In coded systems, a particular signal always conveys the same meaning. Red always means stop in the traffic light system and green always means go. Anyone who has access to the code can interpret the signal.

Languages are codes. When we learn (or try to learn) a new language, we often spend a lot of time and effort learning the new code. For example, an English speaker learning Spanish must learn that the concept which, in English, is represented by the word cat, is represented in Spanish by the word gato. The concept is the same. A cat is still a cat whichever language you are speaking. The signal that is used to talk about that concept is,
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however, different. To learn the new code, we must learn which signal maps onto which concept, and if we have access to a code, then we have access to the encoded information.

Decoding the words of a language will, however, only get us so far in working out what a speaker intends to communicate. First, the way in which words encode meaning is not always as straightforward as the way in which traffic lights encode instructions to stop or go. One word often maps onto more than one meaning (ambiguity), while other words encode concepts that are vague or incomplete in some way. Consider the straightforward and everyday sentence of English in (16).

(16) It is too hot

Any reasonably competent speaker of English will recognise the words in (16) and will be able to decode the lexical items and construct a syntactic representation of the sentence. However, if decoding were the only interpretation process available, we would not be able to determine what proposition the speaker is expressing. Remember that a proposition represents a state of affairs and can be true or false. The coded information in (16) does not, on its own, provide enough information for us to work out what state of affairs is being described. We cannot know what conditions would make (16) true or false based on the encoded information alone.

After decoding, we are left with various questions that need to be answered if we are to understand what the speaker of (16) means. We must, for example, decide what the pronoun it refers to. There are very many possibilities. If the speaker is talking about the weather, then it might refer to the ambient temperature. However, if she is talking about a cup of tea that she has just made, then it is likely that she is referring to the temperature of the liquid. There is nothing in the code to help us choose between these meanings.

In English, the word hot has at least two separate meanings. When talking about the weather or a cup of tea, it is likely to refer to temperature. However, it can also be used to talk about the taste of food, as a close synonym for spicy. Again, there is nothing in the code to help us choose between these meanings. Finally, the adverb too depends on the word that it modifies for part of the meaning that it conveys. We cannot fully understand what is being communicated by its use in (16) unless we can answer the question ‘too hot for what?’ Is the weather too hot for comfort? Is the weather too hot to do exercise? Is the cup of tea too hot to drink? Is the food too spicy for the speaker’s taste? To move from the sentence meaning to the utterance meaning, we must answer these questions. In doing so we construct a proposition that can be evaluated as true or false. Two possible