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# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>Series Editors' Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Transcription Conventions</i>	xiv
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Meanings in context	2
1.2.1 Beyond the linguistic code	2
1.2.2 The scope of pragmatics	5
1.3 The pragmatics of English	8
1.4 This book	10
<b>2 Referential Pragmatics</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Definite expressions	16
2.3 Deixis	21
2.4 Anaphora	30
2.5 Using and understanding referring expressions in interaction	33
2.5.1 Referring expressions and context	33
2.5.2 Referring expressions and accessibility	35
2.5.3 Referring expressions and common ground	37
2.5.4 Referring expressions in interaction	41
2.6 Conclusion	44

<b>3</b>	<b>Informational Pragmatics</b>	<b>45</b>
3.1	Informational pragmatics	45
3.2	Informational ground: background and foreground	46
3.3	Informational background	51
3.3.1	Background assumptions	51
3.3.2	Presuppositions	55
3.4	Informational foreground	64
3.4.1	Foregrounding	64
3.4.2	Focus	65
3.5	Informational pragmatics: an interactional perspective	73
3.5.1	Presuppositions and backgrounding	74
3.5.2	Common grounding	76
3.6	Conclusion	81
<b>4</b>	<b>Pragmatic Meaning I</b>	<b>83</b>
4.1	Meaning beyond what is said	83
4.2	What is said versus what is implicated	84
4.2.1	Grice on speaker meaning	85
4.2.2	Implicated meaning	88
4.3	Between what is said and what is implicated	102
4.3.1	Literalist approaches: the neo-Griceans	103
4.3.2	Contextualist approaches: relevance theory	109
4.4	An interim conclusion: on pragmatic meaning representations	114
<b>5</b>	<b>Pragmatic Meaning II</b>	<b>117</b>
5.1	Analysing pragmatic meaning	117
5.2	Whose meaning?	119
5.2.1	Participant footings	121
5.2.2	Recipient meanings	128
5.3	Understanding meaning	133
5.3.1	Utterance processing	133
5.3.2	Discourse processing	138
5.3.3	Two types of pragmatic meaning?	142
5.4	Meaning in interactional contexts	145
5.4.1	Pragmatic meaning and accountability	145
5.4.2	Pragmatic meaning and meaning-actions	148
5.5	Conclusion	152
<b>6</b>	<b>Pragmatic Acts</b>	<b>155</b>
6.1	Introduction	155
6.2	Traditional speech act theory	156

6.2.1	Doing thing with words: J. L. Austin	156
6.2.2	Developing speech act theory: Searle	162
6.3	Directness/indirectness; explicitness/implicitness	168
6.4	Speech acts in socio-cultural contexts	175
6.5	Pragmatic acts and schema theory	181
6.6	Pragmatic acts in interaction	185
6.6.1	Pragmatic acts in sequence	185
6.6.2	The co-construction of pragmatic acts	189
6.6.3	Pragmatic acts and activity types	191
6.7	Conclusion	195
<b>7</b>	<b>Interpersonal Pragmatics</b>	<b>197</b>
7.1	Introduction	197
7.2	Two general approaches to politeness	199
7.2.1	The socio-cultural view of politeness	199
7.2.2	The pragmatic view of politeness	202
7.3	The two classic pragmatic politeness theories	202
7.3.1	The conversational-maxim view: Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983)	202
7.3.2	The face-saving view: Brown and Levinson (1987)	205
7.4	Recent developments	214
7.4.1	Discursive	214
7.4.2	Relational	217
7.4.3	Frame-based	221
7.5	Impoliteness	222
7.6	The interactional approach to politeness	228
7.7	Conclusion	232
<b>8</b>	<b>Metapragmatics</b>	<b>235</b>
8.1	Introduction	235
8.2	Metapragmatics and reflexivity	237
8.3	Forms of metapragmatic awareness	240
8.3.1	Metacognitive awareness	242
8.3.2	Metarepresentational awareness	247
8.3.3	Metacommunicative awareness	252
8.4	Metapragmatics in use	258
8.5	Conclusion	263
<b>9</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>264</b>
9.1	Pragmatics as language in use	264
9.2	Integrative pragmatics	266

9.2.1	First-order and second-order perspectives on pragmatics	266
9.2.2	Methods in pragmatics	268
9.3	The pragmatics of Englishes	269
	<i>Bibliography</i>	271
	<i>Index</i>	293

**CHAPTER**

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

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Meaning can kill you. In the UK in 1952, Derek Bentley and Christopher Craig broke into a warehouse. Craig was armed with a revolver. They had been seen entering, and the police were called. One police officer managed to grab hold of Bentley. At this point, witnesses claimed that Bentley said: *Let him have it, Chris*. Craig fired, but only grazed the police officer. Nevertheless Bentley was arrested, while Craig managed to get away. Upon the arrival of more police officers, Craig was apprehended, but not before shooting one of them dead. Craig and Bentley were charged with murder, which for Bentley carried the possibility of the death sentence (Craig was underage). Much of the court case, and the subsequent appeals, focused on the ambiguity of the words Bentley had spoken. Do they mean “let the police officer have the gun, Chris”, or do they have the more idiomatic meaning “shoot the police officer, Chris” (presumably derived by metonymy from “let the police officer have a bullet, Chris”, assuming *it* refers to a bullet)? The judge and jury decided on the latter, and Bentley was sentenced to death and hanged. The fact that they made this decision perhaps reflects the cursory way in which ambiguities and indeterminacies of meaning are generally treated. The folk belief is that language fixes meanings, and their recovery is easy – you just need to know the code. In fact, humans determine meanings, and their recovery is far from easy – certainly not just a simple matter of decoding. In 1998 the Court of Appeal overturned Bentley’s conviction. The judge, Lord Bingham, made it clear that the summing up of the original judge, Lord Goddard, had not given adequate attention to the possible ambiguity of the *Let him have it, Chris*, or even whether he had actually said it (R v. Derek William Bentley 1998, paragraphs 74 and 86). In fact, scholars of traditional linguistics would not fare

much better in accounting for Bentley's utterance. Phonology, morphology, syntax and even semantics would have little to contribute to our understanding of why Bentley's utterance was ambiguous, part of which is understanding to whom or what *him* and *it* are referring, and also understanding the presence of literal and non-literal meanings. In contrast, such issues lie at the heart of pragmatics. Let us begin this chapter by working through some examples illustrating issues which are pertinent to pragmatics. After this, we will briefly outline our view of pragmatics, and then conclude by introducing the chapters of this book.

## 1.2 Meanings in context

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### 1.2.1 Beyond the linguistic code

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single person in possession of a fine dictionary must be able to access the correct meaning of a piece of language. The previous sentence was intended to be ironic, but alas many people would not understand it as such. People place great reliance on dictionaries to decode language and expose its meanings. But how far will this actually get us in understanding the language people use? Let us work through some of the problems that one encounters. In doing so, we will simultaneously explore a number of jokes, not least because jokes often exploit the construction of meaning.

#### *The assignment of sense*

**Polysemy**, when a lexeme has multiple related senses, is a normal feature of many words (in this book, technical terms relating to pragmatics are emboldened and defined; they are also listed in the index). The English word *set*, for example, has 36 senses listed in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of the English Language* (1987), plus various usages in expressions. There is also the issue of **homonymy**, two or more different lexemes with the same form. For example, in the sentences *Catch the ball* and *We're going to the ball*, the senses of *ball* are not the same. Note that when you read those sentences, you assign a sense that fits the understanding you construct in your head. People can, of course, exploit your assignment of sense. Consider this joke:

- [1.1] A: Why can't a man's head be twelve inches wide?  
 B: Er ... don't know.  
 A: Because if it was, it would be a foot.

Here, the words *twelve inches wide* prime your mind to expect an answer relating to measurement (even if you had no knowledge of the notion of

“inch”, you might well infer that it is the unit of measurement given that the number twelve is applied to the width of something). Indeed, A’s solution to the joke does relate to measurement: twelve inches on one scale of measurement are equivalent to a foot on another. However, this does not easily fit the meaning speaker A is constructing. If twelve inches is the same as a foot, then why can it not be the width of a man’s head? The solution is in another meaning of *foot*, namely, the part of your leg below the ankle. And of course a *head* is not a *foot*. This joke exploits the polysemic word and the target’s assignment of sense; it is a pun. This joke is lost on people who are not familiar with imperial measurements. For them, the most readily accessible meaning of the word *foot* is likely to be that it is the part of the body below the ankle. The humour falls flat.

### *The assignment of structural meaning*

Although certainly not as frequently an issue as sense assignment, there will be occasions when the structure of a sentence offers more than one meaning. A classic example, and one grammarians love poring over, is *Can you see the man with the telescope?* Is the question about seeing the man with the aid of a telescope (in which case, *with the telescope* is an (instrumental) adverbial working with the verb *see*), or about seeing the man who has a telescope (in which case, *with the telescope* is a prepositional phrase post-modifying the head noun *man*)? Consider this joke:

- [1.2] Q: How do you make a cat drink?  
A: Easy, put it in a liquidiser.

The joke exploits the two different ways in which you can parse the question. In one, *drink* is the main verb of the embedded noun clause *a cat drink*; in the other, *drink* is the head noun of the noun phrase and pre-modified by *cat*. However, part of the success of this joke, just as with the previous joke, relies on the target understanding the sentence in the first way, at least initially. That we are predisposed to do this is not surprising, because this interpretation fits a plausible, non-extraordinary scenario of one’s cat being dehydrated. In contrast, a “cat drink” as a kind of beverage is bizarre. The realisation in one’s mind of the alternative reading is how the joke works. Incidentally, the joke is more likely to fall flat if it is spoken and heard rather than written and read. The different grammatical parsings would sound different: they have different prosodies (try saying them to get an idea of this).

### *The assignment of reference*

In the previous examples, the words and structures flag potential meanings from which we can choose, a choice we make on the basis of how we

understand the context. However, some linguistic expressions – notably, **referring expressions** – do not carry with them multiple senses from which we select, but rely to a greater extent on the target enriching their meaning with information drawn from the context. This is a matter of **reference**. Consider this joke:

- [1.3] A man and a friend are playing golf one day. One of the guys is about to chip onto the green when he sees a long funeral procession on the road next to the course. He stops in mid-swing, takes off his golf cap, closes his eyes, and bows down in prayer. His friend says: “Wow! That is the most thoughtful and touching thing I have ever seen. You are truly a kind man.”

The other man replies, “Yeah, well, we were married thirty-five years.”

Clearly, the success of the joke relies on one working out the **referent** (what is referred to) of the word *we*. Given the subsequent use of the word *married*, we work out that *we* refers to a married couple consisting of the man and his wife, for whom the funeral procession is being held. The realisation that the man playing golf is the husband of the person whose funeral it is and that he is not part of the *long funeral procession* clashes with previous thoughts that this man is *thoughtful* or *kind*.

### *The assignment of utterance meaning*

Having assigned relevant senses to words and worked out the relevant referents of referring expressions, you may think that we are home and dry. This is not the case, as the following joke illustrates:

- [1.4] I was coming back from Canada, driving through Customs, and the guy asked, “Do you have any firearms with you?” I said: “What do you need?”

What this joke illustrates is that the whole utterance *Do you have any firearms with you?* can have more than one meaning: is it an enquiry about whether the driver has firearms or a request for firearms? The difference between the two relates in part to understandings of what the speaker is trying to do, and what they are trying to do is a matter of **speaker intention**. Of course, the humour lies in the fact that the reader expects the former meaning, not least because they know that the driver is in *Customs*, a place commonly associated with searches for firearms and other dangerous weapons or devices, yet the person driving the car answers as if it were the latter.

Collectively, these different levels of meaning and assignment illustrate the fact that dictionaries do not get us very far in understanding the full meaning



of language used in context. This is not to say that they are of no use. Indeed, they are useful in identifying a limited number of potential senses. But we still need to work out which sense is relevant, and much more besides. Speakers of utterances use language to flag potential meanings – that is, meanings which they think are likely to be understood in a particular context; while hearers infer potential meanings – that is, meanings which they think are likely to have been meant in a particular context. Meaning in interaction involves both speakers and hearers (we adopt the traditional labels “speaker” and “hearer” here; in section 5.2 we explain their limitations). **Interactional meaning** is what the speaker means by an utterance and what the hearer understands by it (which could, of course, be two different things), and how these emerge and are shaped during interaction. We will have more to say about interactional meaning in every chapter of this book.

Jokes, as we saw, often exploit the fact that meanings cannot be straightforwardly decoded from words and structures. Many deploy a “garden path” tactic; that is to say, you are led into expecting one thing, only to find that it is another thing. That clash between what we expect and what we discover is the trigger for the potential humour. This is accounted for by an important theory in humour studies, namely, **Incongruity theory**, a theory that has evolved in various guises since Aristotle. Immanuel Kant, for example, comments: “Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” ([1790] 1951:172). More specifically, note that the jokes exploit interactional meaning: they exploit how understandings of the joke unfold in the interaction between not just the characters in the joke, but also the author of the joke and the reader. Clearly, the **discourse situation** – the configuration of discourse roles (e.g. authors, mouthpieces, addressees, overhearers; see section 5.2) relating to a particular interaction – needs to be taken into consideration.

## 1.2.2 The scope of pragmatics

Views about what the field of pragmatics encompasses and what its main thrust should be are controversial. Two principal camps can be identified, one involving a relatively **narrow view** and the other a relatively **broad view**.

### *The narrow view: syntax, semantics and pragmatics*

Many notions in pragmatics can be seen in the work of early writers like Plato and Kant, but especially in that on **pragmatism** by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). However, it was another American philosopher, Charles Morris (1901–1979), drawing on Peirce’s work along with that of Rudolph Carnap, who provided a point of departure for the field

of pragmatics. In his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938: 6–7), he argues for the following three-way distinction:

- Syntax (or syntactics) = mono relationship (relationships between linguistic signs)
- Semantics = dyadic relationship (relationships between linguistic signs and the things in the world that they designate)
- Pragmatics = triadic relationship (relationships between linguistic signs, things they designate, and their users/interpreters)

This has provided linguists with a way of understanding how pragmatics relates to other key areas of linguistics.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it distinguishes pragmatics as the area that deals with context, but also makes clear that it has some aspects in common with syntax and semantics. Morris seems to take a “micro” view of context, mentioning just users and interpreters, and not, for example, social relations or situations. Indeed, this kind of micro context has characterised foundational works in pragmatics such as Grice’s (1975) *Conversational Implicature* or Sperber and Wilson’s ([1986]1995) *Relevance Theory*, with their focus on users’ intentions and interpreters’ inferences.

Pragmatics in this view is often seen as another component in a theory of language, adding to the usual phonetics, phonology, morphology, grammar/syntax and semantics. Sometimes the objective is to get pragmatics to “rescue” other more formal areas of linguistic theory. This is especially true of scholars whose main interest is not pragmatics: they can dispose of problematic areas into the “pragmatics dustbin”, leaving their theories unsullied by contextual ambiguities, indeterminacies and the like. Scholars whose main interest is pragmatics are often set on bringing formal order to these contextual meanings, a case in point being Searle’s work on speech act theory (e.g. 1969). Although such efforts encounter many problems, as we shall see in the case of speech act theory, for example, in Chapter 6, many insights can be gained from their attempted solution.

This view of pragmatics is usually identified as the Anglo-American view. The topics typically discussed within it include reference, deixis, presupposition, speech acts, implicature and inferencing – all of which will be extensively treated in the following chapters.

### *The broad view: pragmatic functions*

What is often identified as the Continental European view of pragmatics does not exclude the kind of topic areas discussed in the Anglo-American view, but

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<sup>1</sup> Morris himself was not, in fact, articulating a theory of language. He did not see these divisions as a matter of dividing up language but dividing up semiotics – the science of signs (e.g. words, gestures, pictures) and how they are organised, used to signify things and understood.

it encompasses much beyond them and has a rather different perspective – in fact, it might be considered in terms of a particular perspective on language. In this view pragmatics is the superordinate field, with disciplines such as linguistics, sociology and psychology as sub-fields. Thus, the range of topic areas is potentially huge. Moreover, pragmatics is not simply about adding a contextual dimension to a theory of language, but a “general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour” (Verschueren 1999: 7). The first part of this quotation indicates that pragmatics is not simply sited within linguistics, but could equally be within cognitive, social or cultural fields of study. The final part of this quotation indicates that pragmatics does not look at linguistic phenomena *per se*, but only at linguistic phenomena in actual usage (the abstract patterns that characterise many areas of linguistic theory are not to be found here). And finally, note that the last word of the quotation broadens the object of analysis to behaviour, which is to say, what people *do*, whether with language or something else (e.g. a gesture), in social contexts. In practice, this view of pragmatics emphasises a socio-cultural perspective on the functioning of language. Superficially, the narrow and broad views seem to share an interest in cognition, but there is a difference of emphasis. As mentioned above, the cognitive intentions and inferences involved in generating a speaker’s meaning or reconstructing a hearer’s understanding of it characterise the narrow view. The broader view would not eschew these, but would often encompass broader cognitive notions, such as the way knowledge about situations, social institutions, cultures and so on might influence and be influenced by language.

Regarding our examples in section 1.2, this broad pragmatic view would not ignore the indeterminacies noted and how they might be resolved, but considerably more discussion would be devoted to the fact that they involved jokes. How does the joke work? How is it processed in the mind? Why is it being told here? What are its social functions? What influences whether it is successful or not? (The cat drink joke could well be abhorrent to cat lovers!) Note, of course, that a distinguishing feature of this view is that it is relatively “macro” in its approach to context.

It is important, however, that one should not over-emphasise differences between the Anglo-American and the Continental European views. A topic such as **politeness**, as discussed in Chapter 7, has a foothold in both, as it seeks to explain both some aspects of linguistic structure and some aspects of social function and context. Moreover, one could argue that any comprehensive analysis of linguistic data should do both, as indeed this book attempts to do. More micro linguistic issues are informed by dynamic two-way inter-relations with more macro socio-cultural issues; conversely, more macro issues of socio-culture are informed by dynamic two-way inter-relations with more micro

linguistic issues. In fact, we would argue for the importance of bridging the micro and macro and not neglecting the middle ground.

### 1.3 The pragmatics of English

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Referring to a “grammar of English” is not uncommon, and a “phonology of English”, a “morphology of English” or a “semantics of English” all sound plausible. But what about a “pragmatics of English”?

A preliminary and not inconsiderable problem in thinking about the possibility of a pragmatics of English is to get a grasp on what “English” is. The “English language” is not in itself a neatly identifiable entity. Consider the view “English is the language of England”. Historically, the roots of English are not in England at all, but in the old Germanic dialects of what is now north-western Germany. Once it became established in Britain, roughly 450 BC onwards, it was relatively restricted geographically: in the 16th century there were approximately three million speakers of English, nearly all indeed based in England. However, today there are well over 300 million native speakers of English – speakers in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and so on. Strictly speaking then, we should now be talking about “Englishes”. And we should not forget to mention a further 300 million regularly speaking English as a second language (i.e. in addition to their native language), and the huge number of people learning it as a foreign language, mainly to communicate with other non-native speakers of English (it is even said that there are more Chinese people learning English than there are native speakers of English in the USA!). Thus, most English is produced, heard and read outside England. One might argue that English has a common core of words and structures that are recognised as being English. The problem here is that not everybody would recognise the same things as being English. Even within England today there are dialectal differences that make identifying that common core difficult. One might appeal to some notion such as Standard English, claiming it represents the common core. But whose standard English are we talking about – British, American, Australian? And there is the issue of what is meant by standard. Appeals to such notions frequently slide from talk of a uniform set of features to talk of a set of features which a particular group considers best. Answers to that question typically involve the social evaluation of language (e.g. British people tend to think that the British standard is best). All these issues present a problem: if we cannot agree about what constitutes English, how can we study it? To study anything requires that there be an object to study. The answer is simply to accept that there is variation in English and there are various views as to what counts as English. We should try to accommodate this variation and those views in our descriptions rather

than obliterating them. In this light, aiming at a “pragmatics of English” is not viable. What one stands a better chance of contributing to, however, is a “pragmatics of Englishes”.

There has been a significant step forward towards a pragmatics of Englishes, namely, Anne Barron and Klaus P. Schneider's *The Pragmatics of Irish English* (2005). This seems to be the first book to focus exclusively on the pragmatics of a national variety of English. Sociolinguists and dialectologists have contributed to descriptions of Englishes (see, for example, Trudgill and Hannah's popular *International English: a Guide to the Varieties of Standard English*, 2002). But such descriptions avoid delving into anything pragmatic (except perhaps brief mentions of features such as tag questions or terms of address and their functions in context). Barron and Schneider's (2005) volume aims to plug this gap. They bring together a number of empirical studies examining Irish English in various contexts and taking account of socio-cultural norms of interaction. They cover a wide range of pragmatic phenomena, including discourse markers, silence, mitigation, speech acts (responding to thanks, offering), politeness and politeness strategies. Relative indirectness turns out to be a feature of Irish English. Schneider and Barron suggest that their volume could be seen as the beginning of a new discipline, **variational pragmatics**, which they suggest lies at the interface of pragmatics and dialectology.

Barron and Schneider's volume is a landmark. By assembling a group of relevant studies, it begins to fill a descriptive gap. Moreover, it stimulated the production of further studies, many of which will be mentioned in the course of this book. Of course, there is much still to be done. For example, they did not consider the complete range of speech acts, of discourse markers, and so on. Also, one might argue that the book does not quite have the broad scope that one might envisage for a pragmatics of Englishes. The following are some of the areas that one might consider:

1. Metapragmatics. This focuses on the language used in a particular English to talk about pragmatic phenomena, and also how such language interacts with the phenomena it talks about. It could include, for example, metapragmatic labels (e.g. speech act labels such as *request*, *threat*, *compliment*) or metapragmatic comments (e.g. “that was an order”, “that was rude”). Such labels and comments can provide insights into beliefs about and the attitudes towards pragmatic phenomena, as well as the real effects that having those beliefs/attitudes can have on English, its social contexts and the people who speak it.
2. Pragmatic forms. This focuses on the nature of the pragmatic forms (forms that conventionally carry pragmatic meanings) of a particular English. For example, *could you tell me the time?* is so conventionalised as a request that it would seem perverse to respond to the literal meaning with *yes* or *no*.

The notion of “forms” here should be taken broadly – it can vary from a grammatical particle to a genre, and it can include forms of non-verbal behaviour.

3. Pragmatic functions. This focuses on the nature of the pragmatic functions of a particular English, for example, its range of speech acts and how individual speech acts perform particular functions.
4. Pragmatic contexts. This focuses on the nature of the pragmatic contexts of a particular English, that is to say, the nature of the contexts within which pragmatic forms and functions interact, for example, how a job interview, a service encounter or family mealtime interaction is constituted by particular pragmatic forms and functions.
5. Pragmatic variation. This focuses on how metapragmatics, pragma-forms, pragma-functions and pragma-contexts vary. Three dimensions of variation are important: (1) **inter-English variation** (similarities or differences amongst Englishes), (2) **intra-English variation** (similarities or differences amongst the sub-varieties of a particular English), and (3) **diachronic variation in English** (similarities or differences amongst the historical periods of a particular English, including how pragmatic phenomena have evolved both within a particular English and across Englishes).

We have listed these areas separately for expository convenience, but they, of course, all interact with each other.

## 1.4 This book

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This book does not undertake the considerable project of describing the pragmatics of a particular English. Instead, it is a pragmatics book that is oriented towards a pragmatics of Englishes. As a pragmatics book, it covers an array of typical pragmatic topics, varying from the more formal to the more socio-cultural. In order, the chapters focus on referring expressions, information structure, pragmatic meaning (including conversational implicature), pragmatic acts (including speech acts), interpersonal pragmatics (including politeness) and metapragmatics. The keystone of our vision of pragmatics for this book is integration. The locus of integrating different perspectives in pragmatics is interaction. Every chapter in this book works towards a focus on the dynamics of pragmatic interaction. To an extent, we are taking the road carved out by Jenny Thomas in her book *Meaning in Interaction* (1995), though that book does not have the broad scope of ours or pursue interactional aspects to the same extent. We could also point to the work of Herbert Clark (e.g. 1996) and its influence in shaping approaches to interactional

pragmatics. In our view, interaction is where pragmatic phenomena happen and so deserves special attention. With respect to theory, repeatedly in this book we describe the dynamic tension between what might be broadly called first-order and second-order perspectives on pragmatics. A first-order perspective is that of the participants themselves, the ones who are using language to mean and do things. A second-order perspective is that of the analyst, including ourselves, the writers of this book, and you the readers. Pragmatics, especially of the narrow Anglo-American kind, was traditionally rooted primarily in a second-order perspective, but has more recently seen a shift towards a first-order perspective, driven in part by pragmatics of the broad European kind. In tune with what we stated at the end of section 1.2.2, we advocate neither perspective exclusively, but seek a middle ground. In other words, we advocate an approach to theorising in pragmatics that not only respects both user and observer perspectives (or at least attempts to), but also bridges them (or at least attempts to). A particular characteristic of our approach is that it is strongly empirical; it informs and is informed by engagement with the data. To give it a label, we refer to this approach as **integrative pragmatics**.

As an English language book, our book does not attempt to be a systematic description of any particular English, but rather to show how pragmatic phenomena and concepts can be related to various Englishes. Every chapter is infused with examples and case studies. A major function of our Reflection boxes is to describe pragmatic variation in English (sometimes characteristics that are shared across a number of Englishes, sometimes specific to a particular English). Reflection boxes are also used to extend particular topics, to add theoretical detail, to describe a specific related phenomenon, and so on. In some ways, one might describe our book as a pragmatics book that is knowingly ethnocentric. In this respect we should note the 2009 special issue (vol. 41) of the *Journal of Pragmatics* entitled “Towards an Emancipatory Pragmatics”. In the introduction to the special issue, the editors state (Hanks et al. 2007: 1–2):

It is our shared conviction that pragmatics as an analytic enterprise has been dominated by views of language derived from Euro-American languages and ways of speaking. Speech acts defined in terms of standard illocutionary forces and felicity conditions, implicatures explained on the basis of the Gricean cooperative principle and maxims, politeness defined in terms of a universal notion of “face”, and the very idea that speech is driven by the exchange of information are all examples of the problem. While these research traditions have enriched the field of pragmatics, they also have tended to rely uncritically on the common sense of speakers of modern Western languages, with the attendant premises of individualism, rationality, and market economy. That is, while they are presented as

12 Pragmatics and the English Language

general models of rational language use, they in fact rely heavily on the native common sense of their authors and practitioners.

Unlike most introductory pragmatics books which give the impression that the pragmatic phenomena they discuss are general, applicable to many languages and cultures, we call a spade a spade – this is a book about pragmatics and the English language.



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# Index

- Abbott, Barbara, 74  
 aboutness, 49–50  
 accent, focal, 49, 67–72  
 accessibility, 34–37  
   Accessibility Marking Scale, 35  
   *see* givenness  
 accountability, 145  
 accouter, *see* participation, recipient  
   footings and roles  
 activity type, 185, 191–195  
 acts  
   face-threatening (FTAs), *see* politeness,  
   face-based  
   pragmatic, 105, 181–183, 185–196, 267  
   *see also* speech acts  
*actually*, 245–246  
 addressee, *see* participation, roles  
 affordances, 182  
 African-American Vernacular English  
   (AAVE), *see* English  
 agency, speaker, 146  
 analysis  
   formal, 268  
   interpretive, 268  
   observational, 268  
 anaphora, *see* referring expressions,  
   anaphoric  
 animator, *see* participation, roles, speaker  
   footings  
 antecedent, 30, *see also* referring expres-  
   sions, anaphora  
 apologies, 229–232  
   public, 178–179  
   *apologise*, 156, 176–179  
 Ariel, Mira, 35  
 articles  
   definite, 16–18  
   development of, 17  
 aspect  
   cessive, egressive and terminative, 58  
   inceptive, inchoative and ingressive, 58  
   and presupposition, 58  
*assert*, 161  
 assertion, 49  
   as new information, 59  
 assumptions  
   background, 51–54  
   infinite recursion of, 38  
   of knowledge, 48–49  
   *see* ground, common  
 attitudes  
   affect, 210  
   interpersonal, 197–198, 232  
 audience, *see* participation, reception  
   roles  
 Austin, John L., 156–162, 162–164,  
   195–196  
 author, *see* participation, roles and  
   speaker footings  
 Bach, Kent, 103–104, 120  
 backgrounding, *see* grounding  
   *see also* foregrounding  
 banter, 226–227  
 Barron, Anne & Klaus P. Schneider, 9,  
   180–181

- Bartlett, Fredric, 52–53  
 Biber, Douglas, 25–26, 32–33, 54, 70, 199  
 block language, 54  
 Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, 169–172  
 Bolinger, Dwight, 72  
 Bousfield, Derek, 222, 224, 227  
 Brown, Penelope, & Stephen C. Levinson, 204–222  
   individualism in approach of, 206  
 Brown, Roger, & Albert Gilman, 24  
 bystander, *see* participation, recipient footings, unratified
- Carston, Robyn, 109–112  
 CCSARP, *see* speech acts  
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 29  
 Clark, Herbert, 10, 38, 41, 77, 124, 129, 131, 172  
 co-construction  
   *see* discourse  
   *see* acts, pragmatic  
 cognition, *see* cognitive status  
 Cognitive Science, 173–174  
 cognitive status, 35–36, 47, 246  
 comment, *see* focus  
 common grounding, *see* grounding  
 communication, ostensive, 110, 135–136  
 compliments, 198–199  
 conditional  
   truth- 91, 155  
   value, 155  
   *see also* Grice; utterance  
 conditionals, 213  
 conditions  
   felicity, 158–159, 161–163, 183–184  
   necessary and sufficient, 183  
   sincerity, 176  
 connectionism, 51 note  
 constraint, Syntactic Correlation, 103–104  
 construals, elective, 129, 131  
   misconstruals, 129–131  
 context  
   defaults for, 138  
   disagreement, 42  
   micro view of, 6  
   pragmatic, 10, 267–268  
   and referring expressions, 33–34  
   *see also* activity type; co-text; relevance  
 contextualisation cues, 192  
 contiguity of talk, 185  
   non-contiguity of prior talk, 174  
 contradiction vs. contrariety, 107  
 contrast, 71–72, *see also* focus
- conventions, usage, 107–108  
 conversation analysis, 174–175, 188  
 conversational implicature, 6  
   implicature, 84, 119  
   audience vs. utterer, 121  
   conventional, 56, 91–92, 106  
   conventional vs. non-conventional, 90  
   conversational, 90, 92–102, 119  
   correction of, *see* repair  
   generalised (GCI), 106–109, 115, 138, 222  
   generalised vs. particularised, 98–99  
   higher-order, 114  
   non-conventional, non-conversational, 90  
   of premises vs. conclusions, 111–112  
   repair of, 142  
   scalar, 106, 116, 138, 141  
   short-circuited (SCI), 107, 115  
   strong vs. weak, 112–113, 128–129  
   vs. entailment, 89–90  
   vs. implicatum, 100  
 Co-operative Principle, Maxims of, 92–95, 133  
   failure to observe, 98 note  
   flouting of, 94, 96  
   hearer corollaries for, 109  
   infringing of, 97–98  
   manner, 93  
   quality, 93–94, 97  
   quantity, 36, 93–94, 97, 106–107, 203  
   relevance, 93  
   violating, 95–97  
 co-text, 14  
 culture  
   Chinese, 206, 225  
   Japanese, 206
- declarative, 168  
 definiteness, 14–21, 74  
   indefiniteness, 14  
   and topic, 50  
 deixis, 14, 21–30  
   centre, deictic, 21–22  
   discourse, 30  
   distal, 28  
   Levinson's definition of, 22  
   personal, 23–24  
   projection, deictic, 22  
   proximal, 28  
   recognitional, 40  
   social, 25–27  
   spatial, 28–29, 42

- deixis, – *continued*  
 temporal, 30  
 textual, *see* deixis, discourse
- demonstratives, 22–23
- determiners, 16
- deviation, 64  
*see also* foregrounding; parallelism
- discourse, 119  
 co-construction of, 140, 185  
 courtroom, 62–63, 104–105, 111, 164  
 emergency telephone calls, 78–81  
 healthcare, 212  
 therapeutic, 75  
 topic, 50, 53  
 situation, 5
- dislocation  
 left, 70, 73  
 right, 70–71
- distance, social, 209
- Donnellan, Keith S., 19
- eavesdropper, *see* participation, recipient  
 footings, unratified, overhearer
- e-mail, 127
- EME (Early Modern English), *see* English
- emoticons, 163–164
- emotions, interpersonal, 197
- end-focus, end-weight, *see* information
- Enfield, Nick, 40
- English  
 AAVE (African-American Vernacular  
 English), 151–152,  
 248–249  
 American, 25, 181  
 Australian, 25, 43–44, 227, 235–236,  
 254–255  
 Australian Indigenous, 260–261  
 Early Modern, 159–160  
 Elizabethan, 24  
 International Corpus of, 126  
 Irish, 9, 25, 166–167, 180–181  
 SPICE-Ireland (Systems of Pragmatic  
 Annotation for International  
 Corpus of English), 166  
 as lingua franca, 18  
 Liverpool, 25  
 Maori, 262–263  
 Northern, 227  
 Old, 17  
 Pakeha, 262–263
- entailment, 90
- eponyms, 13, 21
- equity rights, 225  
*see also* relations
- evaluations, interpersonal, 197
- explicature, *see* relevance
- explicitness, pragmatic, 170
- face, *see* politeness, face-based
- facework  
 aggressive, 208  
 redressive, 208
- felicity conditions, *see* conditions
- figure  
 in visual perception, 46–47  
*see* participation, speaker footings
- Fillmore, Charles, 21, 22
- first-order, *see* pragmatics
- flouting a maxim, *see* Co-operative  
 Principle, Maxims of
- focus, 47–49, 64–73  
 additive, 71–72  
 cognitive, 64–67  
 cognitive and semantic, 66  
 contrastive, 71–72  
 formulae, 72, 81, 92  
 types of, 71  
*see also* end-focus
- footings, *see* participation, recipient and  
 speaker
- force, *see* speech acts
- foregrounding  
 implicit vs. explicit, 64–65  
 structures, 73  
 theory, 64–65  
*see also* deviation; parallelism
- format, production, *see* participation
- forms  
 logical, 110  
 pragmatic, 9–10, 267–268
- formulae, *see* focus; impoliteness; polite-  
 ness; referring expressions,  
 formulaic
- formulaicity, 103, 107–109
- Fox, Barbara, 42–43
- frame, 34, 51  
*see also* politeness, frame-based;  
 schema theory
- Frege, Gottlob, 13, 16, 55–56
- functions, pragmatic, 10, 267–268
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the Clocks)* W. H.  
 Auden, 33
- Gibbs, Raymond, 172
- Givenness  
 cognitive vs. semantic, 49–50  
 Hierarchy, 35–37  
*see also* information

- Goffmann, Erving, 121–122, 124–125, 200, 208
- grammaticalisation, 18
- Grice, H. Paul, 76, 84–88, 88–93, 96, 98–102
- Gricean notion of what is said vs. what is implied,
- contextualist vs. literalist notions of, 102
  - contextualist approaches to, 109, *see* Relevance Theory
  - literalist approaches to, 103–109
  - logical properties of, 103
  - truth-conditional properties of, 103 vs. what is implicated, 84, 102
  - neo-Gricean approaches, 102–109
  - post-Gricean approaches, 102, 109–110
- ground
- common, 37–39, 242–243
  - and presuppositions, 61
  - informational, 46–51
  - back-, 51–64
  - fore-, 64–73
  - see* information, given/new
  - in visual perception, 46–47
  - see* topic
- grounding
- back-, 73–76
  - common, 76–81
  - informational, 73
  - see also* foregrounding
- Gumperz, John, 192
- Gundel, Jeanette K., 35–36
- Halliday, Michael A. K., & Ruqaiya Hasan, 31–32
- Hanks, William F., 11–12
- hearer, *see* audience; participation, participation status, reception roles
- hedges, 213
- Heritage, John, 244–246
- hint*, 149, 153–154, 168–172
- Holtgraves, Thomas, 173–175, 184
- homonymy, 2
- Horn, Laurence, 59, 104, 106–107, 120, 138
- humour, Incongruity theory, 5
- IFID, *see* speech acts
- imperative, 168, 171
- implicating
- implicatum, 100, 119
  - vs. saying, 102
- implicature, *see* Conversational Implicature
- imply*, 88, 149, 153–154
- imply vs. implicate, 88
  - imply vs. infer, 120–121
  - see also* conversational implicature
- impoliteness, 198, 204, 222–234
- cross-cultural variation in, 224–225
  - formulae, 224, 226
  - see also* politeness
- incrementality, *see* speech acts
- indeterminacy, 101–102, 181
- indexicality, orders of, 255
- indirectness
- baited, in AAVE, 151–152
  - in im/politeness, 203–204
  - pointed, in AAVE, 151–152
  - types of speech act strategy, 169
  - see also* speech acts
- individualism vs. collectivism, 206
- infer*, *see* *imply*
- inferences
- intuitive vs. reflective, 137
  - pragmatic, 136–137
  - blocking of, 141–142
  - cancellability of, 141–142
  - defeasibility of, 141–142
  - suspension of, 142
  - see also* Conversational implicature; inferencing
- inferencing, 119
- associative, 51–54
  - associative vs. logical, 51
  - default, 109
  - see also* Conversational Implicature
- information
- back/foregrounded, 46–50
  - given/new, 46–50
  - processibility principle, maxims of
  - end-focus, 66, 74
  - end-weight, 66
  - structure, 45–82
  - see also* foregrounding
- infringing a maxim, *see* Co-operative Principle, Maxims of
- insinuate*, 149–150
- insults, 208, 224, 226–227
- intention
- first, second and third-order, 85–86
  - speaker, 4, 6
- intentionality, 146
- of speech acts, 163
- interpreter, *see* participation, roles and recipient footings

- interrogative, 168  
   polar, responses to, 174  
 invitation, 186–187  
   indirect, 122–123  
 irony, 90, 114, 125, 248–251  
   echoic, 114, 249–251  
   situational, 249–251
- jokes, 2, 3, 4, 5, 36–37  
   *not*-jokes, 95–96
- Jucker, Andreas H., 77–78, 269
- judgement, contextual, 201
- Kant, Immanuel, 5
- Kecskes, Istvan, 108, 121
- Kiesling, Scott F. & Elka Ghosh Johnson, 122
- Kiparsky, Paul and Carol, 55–56
- knowledge  
   background, 39  
   *see* ground, common  
   socio-cultural, 39  
   *see also* Schema Theory
- Kripke Saul, 20
- Lakoff, Robin, 202–203
- Lambrecht, Knud, 72, 74
- languages  
   Austronesian, 29  
   Chinese, 18, 73, 180  
   Fijian, 26  
   Finnish, 73  
   German, 29, 133  
   Ilongot, 161–162  
   Indonesian, 18  
   Italian, 20, 27  
   Japanese, 18, 29, 73, 177  
   Korean, 73  
   Latin, 58  
   Latvian, 18  
   Madurese, 26  
   Malagasy, 29  
   Norwegian, 73  
   Romance, 17–18  
   Salt-Yui, 31  
   Scandinavian, 18  
   Semitic, 18  
   Slavic, 18, 58  
   Spanish, 29  
   Thai, 27  
   Xhosa, 18  
   *see also* English
- Leech, Geoffrey N., 13, 45, 65–66, 181, 202–203, 207–208, 215–216
- Levinson, Stephen C., 22, 55–56, 91, 99, 105–109, 137–138, 175–177, 191–195  
   *see also* Brown, Penelope & Levinson, Stephen C.
- Linguistics  
   Prague School of, 49
- listener-in, *see* participation, recipient  
   footings, unratified, overhearer
- Locher, Miriam A., 215, 217–219
- markers, *see* person; pragmatic markers  
*mate*, 43–44
- maxims  
   *see* conversational implicature  
   *see* Co-operative Principle, Maxims of  
   *see* information, processibility principle, maxims of  
   *see* politeness, maxim-based, Politeness Principle, Maxims of
- meaning  
   communicated, 134  
   compositional, 86  
   implicated vs. idiomatic or formulaic, 89  
   interactional, 5  
   literal, 103–109  
   natural, 85  
   non-natural, 85–88, 102  
   pragmatic, 115, 152–154, 267  
     layering of, 123, 125  
   presumptive, 103–106, 108–109  
   procedural, 243  
   processing of, 133, *see* Relevance theory  
     recipient, 129–133, *see* construals  
   speaker, 85–87, 103, 119–121  
     -intended, 84  
     utterer and recipient representations of, 121  
   structural, assignment of, 3  
   under-determinacy of linguistic, 103  
   utterance meaning, assignment of, 4–5
- meaning<sub>mn</sub>, *see* meaning, non-natural
- metalanguage, 237–239, 241, 261, 263
- Metalanguage, Natural Semantic, 162, 176
- metapragmatic awareness, 241, 258–263
- metacognitive awareness, 242–247
- metacommunicative awareness, 242, 252–258
- interactional, 252
- interpersonal, 253
- metadiscursive awareness, 242

- metapragmatic awareness, – *continued*  
 metarepresentational awareness, 242,  
 247–252
- metapragmatics, 9, 114, 236–263  
*he-said-she-said*, 248–249  
 perspective, 265
- metarepresentation, 114, 247
- Mey, Jacob, 182, 249
- misconstruals, *see* construals
- Morris, Charles W., 5–6
- negation  
 indirect, 59  
 metalinguistic, 59
- neo-Gricean approaches, *see* Grice
- newness, *see* givenness
- norms, *see* politeness, social view of
- not*, *see* jokes, *not*-jokes
- nouns  
 eponymic, 18, 21  
 phrases, definite, 74  
 proper, 19–20, 43, 63
- oaths, 161–162
- overhearer, *see* participation, recipient  
 footings, unratified
- parallelism, 64, 80  
*see also* foregrounding
- participation  
 framework, 121, 125  
 incremental and sequential inter-  
 twining of, 139–140
- reception roles  
 audience, 125
- recipient footings, 124–127  
 accouter, 126–127  
 interpreter, 126  
 participation status, 121, 123–124  
 ratified, addressee or side, 124, 127  
 ratified *vs.* unratified, 124  
 understandings of, 265  
 unratified, bystander or overhearer,  
 124
- recipient positions, multiple, 125
- roles, 121–128  
 addressee *vs.* side participant, 124  
 animator *vs.* recipient, 126  
 author *vs.* interpreter, 126  
 participants *vs.* non-participants, 124  
 principal *vs.* accouter, 126–127
- speaker footings, 121–123  
 animator, 122  
 author, 122  
 figure, 122  
 as target, 123, 126  
 principal, 122  
 production format, 121
- performatives, *see* verbs, performative
- person, 23–24
- markers, 24, 27
- philosophy, ordinary language, 195–196
- Pierce, Charles Sanders, 5
- please*, 198–200
- politeness, 7, 90, 197–202  
 discursive approaches to, 214  
 interactional, 228–232
- face-based, 205–210  
 anticipated, 204, 221  
 cross-cultural variation in, 171–172,  
 229–232  
 directness, cross-cultural variation in,  
 171–172, 195–196, 204  
 face, cross-cultural variation in, 206  
 face, negative, 205, 207  
 face, positive, 205  
 face threat  
 variables affecting,  
 distance, social, 209  
 imposition, rank of, 209  
 relative power of hearer, 209
- face-threatening acts, (FTAs) 208–209
- inferred, 204
- and prosody, 211–212
- strategies,  
 bald on record, 210  
 ‘don’t do the FTA,’ 211  
 linguistic, 213  
 negative politeness, 211  
 off record, 211  
 politeness, 210–211  
 positive politeness, 210–211  
 pragmatic, 202
- formulae, 201, 221
- formulaicity, 103, 107–109
- frame-based, 221–222
- linguistic, 201–202
- maxim-based, 202–205  
 Politeness Principle, Maxims of, 203  
 Agreement, 203  
 Generosity, 203  
 Modesty, 203, 213  
 Polite belief, 203  
 Tact, 203, 207
- social norm view of, 200–201  
 norms, 199–201, 221  
 experiential/descriptive, 201, 221  
 prescriptive social, 199–201

- polysemy, 2
- post-Gricean approaches, *see* Grice
- power, relative, 209  
*see also* relations
- pragmalinguistic, 180–181
- pragmatic act theory, 182
- pragmatic markers, 241, 245–247, 254–255
- pragmatic space, 183
- pragmatics  
  Anglo-American view, 6  
  Continental view, 6–7  
  cross-cultural, 53  
  discourse, *see* pragmatics, informational  
  emancipatory, 11–12  
  experimental, 138  
  first-order perspective on, 11, 265  
  informational, 45–82  
  integrative, 11  
  interactional, 10, 76, 267  
  interpersonal, 197–199  
  Morris' definition of, 6  
  referential, 13–44  
  second-order perspective on, 11, 265  
  scope, broad view of, 6–7  
  scope, narrow view of, 5–6  
  socio-cultural perspective on, 6–7  
  speaker *vs.* hearer-centred approaches, 117  
  variational, 9–10, 180
- pragmatism, 5
- pragmeme, 182
- presupposition, 49–50, 55–64, 74–82, 106  
  in advertising, 62  
  clash, 60  
  counterfactive, 56  
  defeasibility of, 59  
  existential, 55–56, 80  
  factive, 56  
  in legal discourse, 62  
  (non)controversiality of, 76  
  non-factive, 56  
  as old information, 59  
  projection problem, 59–60  
  test for, constancy under negation, 59  
  triggers, 56–61, 74  
  unpresupposed, 74  
  via aspect, 58
- primes, semantic, 177
- principal, *see* participation, roles and speaker footings
- Principle  
  *see* Co-operative Principle; Politeness Principle
- see* information, processibility principle  
*see* Relevance Theory  
*see also* conversational implicature
- processing  
  discourse, 133, 138–145  
  utterance, 133–137, 142–145
- promise*, 156–158, 161–164
- pronounce*, 156
- pronouns, 22–24, 27–28  
  exclusive-we, 28, 122  
  inclusive-us, 122  
  royal-we, 27–28  
  third person, anaphoric use of, 31–32
- y'all*, 25
- yinz*, 25
- yous*, 25
- propositions, 155
- prototype theory, 183
- psychology, Gestalt, 46–51
- quotations, 248
- rapport management, 219–221  
  *see also* relations
- recipients, *see* participation, recipient footings
- recognisability, 267–268
- recursion, 38
- recursivity, 248–249
- reference, assignment of, 3  
  *see* referring expressions, definiteness, deixis, indefiniteness
- referent, 4
- referring expressions, 3–4, 13–44, 52–53  
  anaphoric, 4–15, 30–33  
  attributive, 19  
  cataphoric, 32  
  co-referential, 31  
  definite, 15–17  
  deictic, 15, 22  
  endophoric, 31  
  exophoric, 31  
  and fictional worlds, 34  
  formulaic, 108–109, 115  
  generic, 22  
  gestural, 22  
  homophoric, 32  
  referential, 19  
  routine, *see* formulaic  
  symbolic, 23
- reflexivity, 236–246  
  and face, 206

- relations, interpersonal, 197–198  
*see also* distance, power, rapport management
- relevance, 110  
 optimal, 135–136
- Relevance Theory, 6, 39 note, 91, 102, 109–114, 119, 129, 134–137, 198 note, 243, 248  
 Cognitive Principle of Relevance, 135  
 Communicative Principle of Relevance, 110, 135  
 effects, contextual, 134–135  
   positive, 134  
   types of, 134  
 effort, processing, 134–135  
 explicature, 110–111  
   higher-order, 114  
 and politeness, 216–217
- representation, 84  
 higher-order, lower-order, 247–248  
 meaning, 103–109, 114–116  
   embedding of, 113–116  
 saying vs. implying, 84–87  
 utterer and recipient, of speaker  
   meaning, 121  
*see also* meaning
- resemblances  
 interpretive, 248  
 metalinguistic, 248
- response, dispreferred, 188
- rheme, *see* focus
- rhetoric  
 interpersonal, 197–198  
 textual, 45
- roles  
 production, 121–124  
 reception, 124–125  
*see* participation framework, recipients
- rules, constitutive, 162–163  
 regulative, 162  
 social, 200  
*see also* speech acts
- Russell, Bertrand, 16, 20, 56
- sarcasm, 202, 228
- Saul, Jennifer, 121
- saying  
 meaning vs. uttering, 88  
 saying vs. implicating, 102  
 saying vs. saying<sub>2</sub>, 87–88, 115, 117–118  
*see also* meaning
- scenario  
 illocutionary, 173–174  
*see also* schema theory
- Schank, Roger C. & Robert P. Abelson, 52–53
- Schegloff, Emanuel, 107, 141, 190
- Schema theory, 34, 51–54, 183–187  
*script, see* schema theory
- Searle, John R., 161–165, 168–170
- second-order, *see* pragmatics
- semantics, Morris' definition of, 6
- semiotics, 6 note
- sense, assignment of, 2–3
- sentence type and speech act, 168–169
- sequentiality, 185–189  
*see also* participation
- Shakespeare, William  
*Hamlet*, 159  
*Othello*, 150
- signifying, *see* English, AAVE
- situatedness, 198
- sociopragmatic, 180–181  
*see also* pragmatics
- sounding, *see* banter
- space, *see* pragmatic
- speaker, *see* meaning; participation, speaker footings
- speech acts, 156–181  
 change over time, 167  
 co-construction of, 189–191  
 commissives, 164–165  
 conventional indirect, 172  
 Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP), 169–172  
 declarations, 164–167  
 direct, 168  
 direction of fit of, 164–165  
 directives, 165  
 directness, 168–172  
   cross-cultural variation in, 171–172  
 expressives, 165–167  
 force of,  
   IFID (illocutionary force indicating device) 168, 180  
   illocutionary, 160–163  
 head, 170  
 illocutionary point of, 164  
 incrementality, 185  
 indirect, 172–175, 193–194  
 locutionary, 160  
 move, support, 170–172  
 perlocutionary, 160  
 pragmatic, 105, 181–183, 185–196, 267  
 representatives, 164  
 requests, 168–172, 181–185  
 rogatives, 165, 172



- speech acts, – *continued*  
 sequentiality of, 185–189  
 state, expressed psychological, 164  
 strength of, 164  
 theory, 156–181  
*see also* indirectness; verbs,  
 performative
- Spencer-Oatey, Helen, 217,  
 219–221
- Sperber, Dan & Deirdre Wilson, *see*  
 Relevance Theory
- SPICE-Ireland, *see* English, Irish
- stage directions, 63–64
- Stalnaker, Robert C., 60–61,  
 74–76
- stance, attitudinal, 114
- strategies, *see* politeness, face-based
- Strawson, Peter F., 55–56
- syntax  
 Morris' definition of, 6  
 sentences,  
 cleft, 57, 70–71  
 it-cleft, 70–71, 74  
 structures,  
 dislocated, 69–70  
 preposed, 69  
 subject, dummy, 31  
*see also* declarative, dislocation, end-  
 focus, end-weight, imperative,  
 interrogative
- target, 3–4, 17, 28, 35, 37, 41, 44, 50, 58,  
 76–78, 227–228, 230, 233  
*see also* participation, speaker footings,  
 figure
- Tarski, Alfred, 239
- teasing, 126, 227, *see also* banter
- Terkourafi, Marina, 221–224
- the*, development of, *see* article, definite
- theme, *see* topic
- themes in short stories, understanding  
 of, 129
- Thomas, Jenny, 10, 180, 202
- threat*, 163
- topic  
 and definiteness, 50  
 discourse, 50, 53  
 and focus, 66  
 semantic, 49–50
- truth conditions, *see* conditions
- utterance, 155–156  
 higher-order, lower-order,  
 248–249  
 performative, 157  
 processing, 133–137, 143–145  
 situation-bound, 108  
 truth-conditional content of, 91  
 utterance-token, 103  
 utterance-type, *see* meaning,  
 presumptive  
*see also* representation
- variation, cross-cultural, *see* impoliteness;  
 politeness face-based; prag-  
 matics, variational
- verbs  
 change-of-state, 58, 63–64, 80  
 constative, 161  
 factive, 74  
 performative, 156–162  
 collaborative, 157  
 in EME, 159–160  
 explicit, 160, 168  
*hereby* test for, 157  
 implicit, 160, 168  
 ritual, 157  
 self-referential, 157
- Verschueren, Jeff, 124
- Verständigung*, 138–139, 143  
*vs. Verstehen*, 133, 143
- violating a maxim, *see* Co-operative  
 Principle, Maxims of
- vocatives, 25–26  
 endearments, 25  
 familiarisers, 26, 43–44  
 first names, 26  
 honorifics, 26–27  
 kinship terms, 26  
 title and surname, 26
- Watts, Richard J., 215–219
- what is said *vs.* what is implied, *see* Grice;  
*see also* meaning
- Wierzbicka, Anna, 149–150, 162, 169,  
 172, 177–178
- worlds  
 fictional, 34, 63  
 possible, 63
- yeah-no*, 254–255