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CHAPTER

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

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

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.[1] 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

[1] 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

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

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

> 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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