

Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach
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Lecture – 50
Pragmatics: An introduction – Part 1

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Pragmatics: Stephan C. Levinson (1983)



Hello everyone, welcome to this session of the NPTEL course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach. We are going to start with a new unit or a new set of discussion today. Until now we have had quite a bit of discussion on various branches of linguistic typology which include syntactic, semantic, phonological, morphological, and lexical typology. Now is the time to talk about pragmatics which is the functional aspect of language primarily, it is not always functional, but generally it is considered as the functional or the language usage related discussion.

Before moving to the pragmatic typological approach which is termed as pragmatic typology in the syllabus if you check it. But before knowing that, we need to find out how to understand pragmatics, and what do we understand by pragmatics. Once you understand what pragmatics is, then maybe we should talk about pragmatic typology because this is little

different. Semantic typology and pragmatic typology would be a bit different from the rest of the typological discussions or the rest of the typological work.

It is more philosophical or more semantic in nature. To begin with, I would like to tell you the modern use of the term pragmatics would be attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris and his 1938 work is the foundation of this academic discipline or this study of language phenomena. So, if you talk about Morris(1938), he was primarily concerned with the general shape of a science of signs. These are the homophones, please do not get confused. The other one is related to sign, signifier in signifier relation.

Considering the discussion, Morris always prefers to use the term semiotics which means the relevance or the study of signs and the part of semiotics was known as pragmatics, and this pragmatics would be primarily the study that is related to the relation of signs to the interpreter. So, two things, one is a set of signs, the other one is the interpretations.

The academic discipline which studies the relation between the sign and the interpreter was known as pragmatics, at the very early days when this discipline emerged. But a lot of things have changed, after that. They have something called pure pragmatics and then we had different other kinds of pragmatics study related to formula and functional aspects of language or aspect of linguistics. The descriptive studies primarily deal with the pragmatics of natural language; a lot of things have changed.

So, instead of focusing more on the historical aspect, I would just give you a brief overview of how the linguists understand pragmatics. What are the standard definitions and which one is considered to be the most effective? How pragmatics is positioned in the domain of linguistics and what should be the point of departure when we talk about pragmatic typology?

I will just discuss a couple of things that Morris has noted as far as all these phrases are concerned. Come here or good morning or let us say wow, these kind of things. When you say come here, it is just not the combination of the two terms come and here, rather there are a lot of other pragmatic markers loaded. It is a speech act, and what is a speech act? We are going to check it later, but the phrases or the sentences like good morning or hello or come here or you can say wow, even a single word like wow which is actually a full sentence and

its own sense. So, these are the sentences which have a lot of pragmatic information loaded with this.

Somebody who is trying to study pragmatics as a linguistic discipline or as a part of linguistics would have to go through the understanding of different kinds of rhetorical and poetic devices when you are thinking about the use of the language. Because language can be used in multiple ways, and considering there are different ways of usage of language, we have to find out or we have to identify which use is related to what phenomenon.

That would be a part of the speech act theory, which we will briefly discuss later, but what Morris has done, he has he has gone on to expand the scope of pragmatics in accordance with the behavioral theory of semiotics which does not really consider much of the linguistics component, but rather the psychological component, the sociological phenomenon, and language has been considered as a biological, psychological, and sociological phenomena and this has been studied under the domain of functioning of science, the signifier-signified relation.

But one thing was very significant about Morris's work is that he introduced the trichotomy, and what is the trichotomy? Syntax semantics and pragmatics. The interface of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics is extremely essential for a language researcher to understand the nuances of how natural language works, how natural language is used in the discourse.

So, if you cannot ignore the role of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics together when you are trying to understand the usage of language in the discourse, the discourse could be anything, it could be written discourse it could be spoken discourse, time and again. I have been reiterating my focus is always on the spoken discourse.

Because I do not really discuss much about the written system of language. So, following Morris, the trichotomy that has been discussed in an extensive manner is the understanding of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. And as far as pragmatics is concerned, it has moved from non-linguistic aspects to the linguistic aspect of the conversation.

When you talk about natural language conversation analysis, pragmatics actually plays a huge role because of its distinct markers, but if you ask me there is a term called pure

pragmatics, if you study the history of pragmatics a bit. Pure pragmatics would be related to concepts like belief, utterance, intention. These are the things, I am going to write it over here is a small box that I am drawing.

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When there is something called pure pragmatics. It might sound a little weird because this pure-impure thing we do not really talk about in linguistics, there is nothing called pure language or impure language. So, when it is pure pragmatics it is going to be generally concerned with belief, then you can have utterance, plus you can have let us say intention. So, these are various things that would come under the umbrella term called pragmatics and what is it? The logical relation among these things.

So, when you are thinking about pure pragmatics, these are the terms that you need to focus on. However, our focus is going to be the linguistic aspect of pragmatics, we are not really going to talk about these issues related to belief, utterance and intention, rather we will try to find out how language or what sort of pragmatic markers or what kind of crosslinguistic pragmatic generalization can be drawn from our understanding of pragmatics as a discipline of linguistics.

Now I would ask you to look at these two pictures, I have got these pictures from Yule's book. So, what do you think does the first picture say? This is let us say 1, and this is 2. So,

what do you think? What does the first picture say and what does the second picture say? Do you think just the linguistic inputs are not going to be enough to convey the meaning. If you remember or maybe I am going to talk about it later probably. There is something called say that much what you must, do not say anything beyond that and try to convey the maximum information with the minimum number of words that you had used.

The minimum number of words does not mean that you will miss out or you would ignore the essential phrases or the essential elements, you cannot do that. Considering we have restriction like being humans we should always think about the use of the minimum number of words without missing out on any essential phrase and in spite of using the very limited set of words or very limited set of phrases, our speech should be creative enough to incorporate or to convey everything that we wanted to say.

So, that is something creative about human speech. So, pragmatics would also say speak only that much what you must, and always mean more than what you have said. What does it mean? Try to use minimum number of linguistic phrases, and using minimum number of linguistic phrases you should convey the maximum information as much as possible. With this tiny bit of information about pragmatics, let us look at these pictures.

These are the perfect examples of how the minimum number of words can also create a lot of confusion, especially when you are trying to understand it from the linguistic perspective. So, what does the first picture say? The first picture says heated, attendant, parking. What do you understand? What is that? This is why I told you from Yule's book.

What do you think it means? The first word is heated, second word is attendant, third word is parking; isn't it? When you see a sign like this, the very first thing that should come to your mind is that this parking would be done by the attendant of the restaurant. You do not have to park may be it is valet parking area or the valet parking facility is available. They have the attendants who can park the car for you.

You do not have to worry about it. Then the second thing is that what is the other interpretation that you get if you park your car here? The car is going to be heated; that means, this area does not have much shadow. Your car might be heated, this is what the sign

board wants to convey, this is what people who have written it want you to interpret, but do you think this kind of an interpretation is the only interpretation that comes from here?

No, there could be the other meaning. When you look at this the first thing that catches your attention is heated attendant, heated attendant means you choose any attendant and you beat him up or you beat her up and this is where you can park him or her; that means, it is not about car parking it is basically heated attendant parking.

The attendants are being parked here, such a weird meaning does it convey. So, by looking at the hoarding or looking at the sign board, one possible interpretation could be the attendant who has been beat in up or has been torture or heated in that is in beat maybe or verbally abused or physically abused whatever is going to be parked here. So, that is and see what exactly the sign board wants to convey the sign board wants to convey, it is the heated area, please do not park your car here on your own, we have our attendance to take care of it.

Now, you see how the meaning completely changes if you do not have the right kind of pragmatic markers or just by looking at the linguistic inputs how it is going to be a weird situation or how the meanings are going to be completely different. Pragmatics does have a big role to play and or I must tell you there is no problem as far as grammar is concerned, because this is a sign board. And then we do not really use the other closed class words, primarily we deal with the open class nouns, verbs etcetera. And then just a bit of difference is going to change the meaning from a very positive one to a very negative one.

The positive meaning is that you have been warned, you are the car owner and you have been warned in advance that this is a place you may not like to park your car because this is a heated area. Since this is a heated area, we have our attendants to help you to park your car. But such a wonderful thing that you have people to help you out and you have been warned not to park your car here because you might get a flat tyre at the end of the day; so all good things.

But the way it has been written on the board that gives a very different opinion. Now, let us move to the second picture that we have. What does it say? It says baby and toddler then there is a third word written which is sale. So, what does it mean? And there are a couple of

babies and toddlers, super cute ones; one is upside down, one is trying to do some squat or whatever. There are 4 tiny babies and tiny toddlers sitting over here and it is written sale.

What is the first impression that you get? That this is a place where people are selling babies and toddlers which is so inhuman; which is such a gross thing to think about. How can you indulge in a sale like how can you sell babies and toddlers? But then actually the sign board does not want to say that. The sign board wants to say that you will find out the baby related stuff or the toddlers related stuff, maybe the clothes or whatever or the toys, that has a sale here, they are not selling anything as far as babies and toddlers are concerned.

They are not selling them, rather they are selling some stuff maybe clothes which can be of use to the babies and toddlers. So, assuming things are normal and the store has not gone into the business of selling young children, we assume that it is about the clothes. Though it is not written explicitly that we are selling clothes of babies and toddlers, you can easily understand that the sale is not for the children, but for the clothes of children.

That means, just linguistic units are not the only deciding factors to convey the meaning. Just by writing these three things the sign board can actually give a lot of other information, though they have not exclusively mentioned, you still could understand. That means, beyond the linguistic information, there must be something else which helps us to get the meaning out of it. Similar is a case with the first hoarding or the first sign board. Though it is written heated, attendant, parking, we understood that the attendants are not parked here, the attendants are not heated, rather this is a heated place and they have the attendants to take care of your car, do not worry.

Since this is a heated place, we have our people who can assist you in parking, who can help you or who can keep a check on your vehicle. So, this is the world of pragmatics, interpretation. The term here is interpretation. These are the key terms, then we have signs.

So, these are the two important components of pragmatics. The signs could be linguistic signs could be non-linguistic ones also, simple like beliefs, utterance and intention. So, for our work we are going to focus on the linguistic signs, and the linguistic signs are associated with

certain other pragmatic markers which is why we get a holistic meaning out of a limited number of phrases.

Though it is written baby and toddler sale, we clearly understand that the store is not selling young children, rather the store is selling clothes for the young children, the clothes for the babies and toddlers. Similar is the case, though the hoarding says heated, attendant, parking, we understood that the attendants are not parked here, rather your car can be taken care of by our attendants or by their attendants because this area might be heated.

So, what do we understand or what is the need of bringing in examples like that? Bringing in these examples we emphasized the influence of context. This is what you need to remember or you need to understand that influence of context is very important in pragmatics. Nobody actually told you that the sale is for clothes, nobody told you the parking is for cars and it is the help of an attendant, but you got it, you understood that this could have been the possible meaning and these are the different kinds of contexts.

What are the different kinds of context here? One is the linguistic context and what is linguistic context? What is written, the linguistic phrases which have been used, the letters, the words which have been used, that is the linguistic context. Besides the linguistic context, you also have a co-text, linguistic context plus the co-text. So, these things together give us a meaning. So, what is a co-text? Co-text could be a new word for you. Just to explain this to you, the co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence.

That means, the combination of many words together gives you a different interpretation. Independently that would give a different interpretation, but when many words are combined together in a co-text form then the meaning it has a strong effect and the meaning comes out clearly. So, the combination of the linguistic context and the co-text which are mainly the pragmatic informations associated with it, it helps us to get the right meaning of this context. We will talk about it in more detail in a while.

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Defining Pragmatics

- Study of the relations of signs to interpreters
- Study of language usage
- Study of those principles that will account for why a certain set of sentences are anomalous, or not possible utterances
- Study of language from a functional perspective
- Study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language

*Pragmatics
→ context-dependent
aspect of language
structure
→ principles of language
usage*



But let us look at how linguistics literature has understood pragmatics. What is the definition of it? As I just mentioned a while ago, to begin with, pragmatics started with the relation between the sign and then the interpretation. So, which sign has been interpreted as how; that is the most rudimentary thing to understand pragmatics, but this sign s i g n this may or may not be linguistic sign, it could be some other psychological, behavioral other stuff.

It is much later that we became more focused about linguistic signs. So, pure pragmatics which I was talking about, it might be beliefs, it might be situations, it might be utterance, it might be anything else. These are the behavioral things, the psychological things; no where would you see that these are the linguistic signs, it could be any other kind of sign and their interpretation. But if you narrow it down in the purview of linguistics as an academic discipline, it is going to be related to only linguistics, otherwise it could be anything else.

So, if we focus on the phrase or the term called linguistic sign, the broadest possible definition of pragmatics would be, it is the study of language use, not the form, not the structure. This is the most surface level definition I can tell you. But pragmatics and grammar also has a long connection or it has a very intricate connection, a strong connection, we should also take care of it. But when we say study of language usage, very likely we are

going to ignore, which is actually not the case that is we definitely take care of the form or the structure part of it.

But primarily the focus is like the shortest possible definition of pragmatics would be the study of language usage. If you are using it properly or if you are trying to study that, then it will be considered as pragmatics. But that was not sufficient as I just mentioned. This kind of a definition has more flaws than strengths. You cannot simply use a blanket term like language uses could be anything.

What is so special or what is so specific about pragmatics as far as this definition is concerned? So, there is a lot of flanks associated with this and we will try to or we will move to the next definition in that sense. So, what do we have? Considering we have the definitional problems, our discipline should cover both context dependent aspect of language structure and principle of language usage, so two things.

What is the problem if we restrict ourselves with usage? It is not here in the slide, but just remember, pragmatics should have two different domains or two different aspects of it. It must take care of the context dependent aspect of language structure and it should also take care of the usage or the function. You cannot ignore either of this. Not only the structure, but also it should take care of principles of language usage.

Both the things should go hand in hand, then only pragmatics can come up with the holistic definition. Otherwise if you only focus on usage; that means, you are ignoring a very important aspect of language and pragmatics would be a cripple discipline if you do not consider that. Context dependent aspect of language structure has to be given equal importance as the amount of importance has been given to the principles of language usage. That is the first thing. Then moving onto the next set of like the next definition which is more fine-tuned, which is more solid in that sense, which has gone beyond the superficial language uses kind of thing.

The other one is a little more rigid, the other one is a little more streamlined; streamlined is the right word I should use. What is it? Pragmatics is the study of those principles that will account for why a certain set of sentences are anomalous or not possible utterances. So, what

is the talk about? It talks about possibility or impossibility or accepted-unaccepted form of language or form of a construction.

See this kind of a definition when you say it should give us an account, it should give us a reason why a certain set of sentences are anomalous. Anomalous is basically they are not possible; it is not possible for the utterance of certain constructions. Pragmatics should be the study of those reasons. So, somebody who studies pragmatics should be able to understand the reasons why a certain set of sentences are not considered to be the possible utterances.

If you are able to get that, then you are ok. So, pragmatics is going to be a study of such things. This is a more narrowed down definition of pragmatics. This might have a couple of issues or problems, but one thing that you need to remember is that when you move from this definition, we will have a more linguistically structural understanding. We will go back to it in a while.

Keywords: pragmatics, sign, semiotics, interpretation, functional linguistics, speech act, trichotomy, conversational analysis, pure pragmatics, linguistic context, co-text