**University of Batna 2 Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages Department of English**

**Module: PRAGMATICS**

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| **LECTURE ONE****WHAT IS PRAGMATICS?** |

**Some Definitions of Pragmatics**

Quite a number of language scholars have defined pragmatics throwing some light on the nature, principles and scope of pragmatics. Let’s look at a few of them.

**(i) Leech & Short (1981) -** Pragmatics is “the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.” (p. 290). Notice the word “utterances” not necessarily sentences.

**(ii) Leech (1983) -** Pragmatics is “the study of meaning in relation to speech situations”. The speech situation enables the speaker use language to achieve a particular effect on the mind of the hearer.” (p.6). Thus the speech is goal-oriented (i.e. the meaning which the speaker or writer intends to communicate).

**(iii) Levinson (1983) –** Pragmatics is “the study of those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars.” (p.9). Notice in this definition that interest is mainly in the inter-relation of language and principles of language use that are context dependent.

**(iv) Yule (1996) –** Pragmatics is “the study of intended speaker meaning.” It is “in many ways … the study of invisible meaning or how we recognise what is meant even when it isn’t actually said (or written)" (p. 127).

**Principles/Goals of Pragmatics**

From the above definitions of pragmatics you will notice that there some common features that will help us understand better the principles and goals of pragmatics: All the definitions stress the following:

 Language use i.e. language in actual speech situations (language performance rather than mere cognitive skills). In other words, what is important is how language users communicate in oral conversations or in writing, not necessarily how grammatically correct the sentences are.

 Discourse/utterance rather than sentence

 The context of the speech – location of participants in a conversation/discourse

 Goal of utterance/discourse or speaker’s intention

 Participants in a conversation/discourse situation, their roles, relationship and identities, since these have some influence on how meanings are encoded and interpreted

 Shared assumptions/knowledge, cultures, or conventions of participants in communication.

 The fact that interactants do not rely only on their knowledge of the language system when they interpret meaning but also their knowledge of the world, cultures, conventions or world view.

In stressing utterances in communication rather than structural sentences, a pragmatics analyst seeks to explain what communicators actually “do” with language whether consciously or unconsciously. Let’s look at this illustration.

Jide alights from a taxi. Luckily he sees a friend of his (Mark) standing nearby. He goes forward to talk to Mark while the taxi waits for him.

*Jide: Mark, what’s up? Do you have some change on you?*

*Mark: What I have is not enough to pay a taxi fare.*

Notice that Jide seemingly asks two questions: “what’s up?” and “do you have some change on you?” Mark immediately understands that Jide is not asking a yes or no question, rather a request for money to pay his taxi fare, so he gives an explanatory answer. Again he takes it for granted that “what’s up” is a form of greeting than a question. Now “yes” or “no” would have been the right answer to the second question if it was asked in a different context, say a bank. Of course you know that if they were total strangers Mark will certainly not use the same words; hence “what’s up” was not only a greeting but also a means on initiating a conversation/discourse. It also indicates that some psychological bond or ***relation*** exists between them. Hence Jide right assumed that mark would interpret his “questions” correctly.

**The Scope of Pragmatics**

By scope, we mean the levels to which the study of pragmatics has been extended. For the purpose of our present study, we must mention that linguistic pragmatics as it is used today is a lot more restricted than when the term “pragmatics” was first used by Charles Morris (1938). Morris was interested in ***Semiotics*** – the general study of signs and symbols. Pragmatics was defined as the “relation of signs to the interpreters.” We shall look at this in detail in the next unit. Morris then extended the scope of pragmatics to include psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs (Levinson, 1983). This will include what is known today as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistic, neurolinguistics among others. Today, linguistic pragmatics mostly dwells on those factors of language use that govern the choices individuals make in social interaction and the effects of those choices on others (Crystal, 1987).

In recent times however, extended researches in cultural studies and social discourse argue in favour of ***discourse pragmatics*** rather than the traditional linguistic pragmatics. Fairclough (1989) for instance argues that rather than see language use as an individual’s strategies of encoding meaning to achieve some particular effects on the hearer or reader, we should be concerned with the fact that social conventions and ideologies, define peoples roles, identities and language performances; people simply communicate in some particular ways as the society determines. While people can manipulate language to achieve certain purposes, they in some circumstances are actually ruled by social conventions. In the same vein, pragmatic study has thrown some lights in the study of literature giving rise to literary pragmatics, while the application of pragmatics to computational linguistics has also developed into computational pragmatics, etc.

**Utterance Meaning versus Sentence Meaning**

In the definition of pragmatics by Leech (above), you will notice that one of the principles of pragmatics is the emphasis on “utterance” meaning rather than word or sentence meaning, and how such utterances relate to the context in which they are used. The difference between an utterance and a sentence is the fact that an utterance need not be syntactically perfect the same way we expect a sentence to be. A sentence must satisfy some basic grammatical rules (e.g. subject/verb/complement structural pattern.) An utterance on the other hand doesn’t even have to be a sentence. It may be a word like “settle,” a phrase like “area boy,” a contracted form like “what’s up?” or an exclamation like *hei* or *Ooh*! The “meaning” we associate with these utterances is defined in terms of their *functions or the intention* of the speaker in uttering them. While sentence meaning is a function of the words in the sentence together with the overall sense of the sentence, utterance meaning relies much more on the intention of the utterance in relation to the context.

**CONCLUSION**

We can therefore conclude that pragmatics as a linguistic discipline is a worthwhile academic endeavour as it exposes us to interesting insights to the actual functions of language in social interactions. Thus, the study of language has been extended significantly beyond mere description of linguistic properties to the various creative ways individual communicators construct meaning in different socio-cultural contexts. Pragmatics has also been able to account for social meanings which formal semantics has tended to overlook, giving new insights to the understanding of literary texts and in fact helping to formulate strategies for the teaching and learning of language.

**SUMMARY**

In this lecture we have examined the various definitions of pragmatics which enable us see the actual concerns and goals of linguistic pragmatics. All the definitions agree that pragmatics is **a study of meaning from the point of view of the language user, showing what choices s/he makes and how these capture his/her intentions in some particular contexts.** Hence, pragmatics stresses utterances rather than sentences; utterance functions/goals rather than grammaticalness and the kind of cultures/conventions which influence how speakers/writers encode and interpret meaning. We have also examined some areas of study where pragmatic principles have been quite useful in the interpretation of meaning giving rise to discourse pragmatics, literary pragmatics, computational pragmatics among others. We shall consider pragmatics and its interfaces in details later in this study.

**REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: CUP

Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and Power. London: Longman

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