CHAPTER 10
Pragmatics

In the late 1960s, two elderly American tourists who had been touring Scotland reported that, in their travels, they had come to a Scottish town in which there was a great ruined cathedral. As they stood in the ruins, they saw a small boy and they asked him when the cathedral had been so badly damaged. He replied *in the war*. Their immediate interpretation, in the 1960s, was that he must be referring to the Second World War which had ended only twenty years earlier. But then they thought that the ruins looked as if they had been in their dilapidated state for much longer than that, so they asked the boy which war he meant. He replied *the war with the English*, which, they eventually discovered, had formally ended in 1745.

Brown (1998)

In the previous chapter, we focused on conceptual meaning and the relationships between words. There are other aspects of meaning that depend more on context and the communicative intentions of speakers. In Gill Brown's story, the American tourists and the Scottish boy seem to be using the word *war* with essentially the same basic meaning. However, the boy was using the word to refer to something the tourists didn't expect, hence the initial misunderstanding. Communication clearly depends on not only recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance, but also recognizing what speakers mean by their utterances. The study of what speakers mean, or "speaker meaning," is called pragmatics.

Pragmatics

In many ways, pragmatics is the study of "invisible" meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers (or writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provides us with some insights into how we understand more than just the linguistic content of utterances. From the perspective of pragmatics, more is always being communicated than is said.

There are lots of illustrations of this pragmatic principle. Driving by a parking garage, you may see a large sign like the one in the picture (Figure 10.1). You read the sign, knowing what each of the words means and what the sign as a whole means. However, you don't normally think that the sign is advertising a place where you can park your "heated attendant." (You take an attendant, you heat him/her up, and this is where you can park him/her.) Alternatively, the sign may indicate a place where parking will be carried out by attendants who have been heated. (Maybe they will be more cheerful.)

The words in the sign may allow these interpretations, but we would normally understand that we can park a car in this place, that it's a heated area, and that there will

Figure 10.1

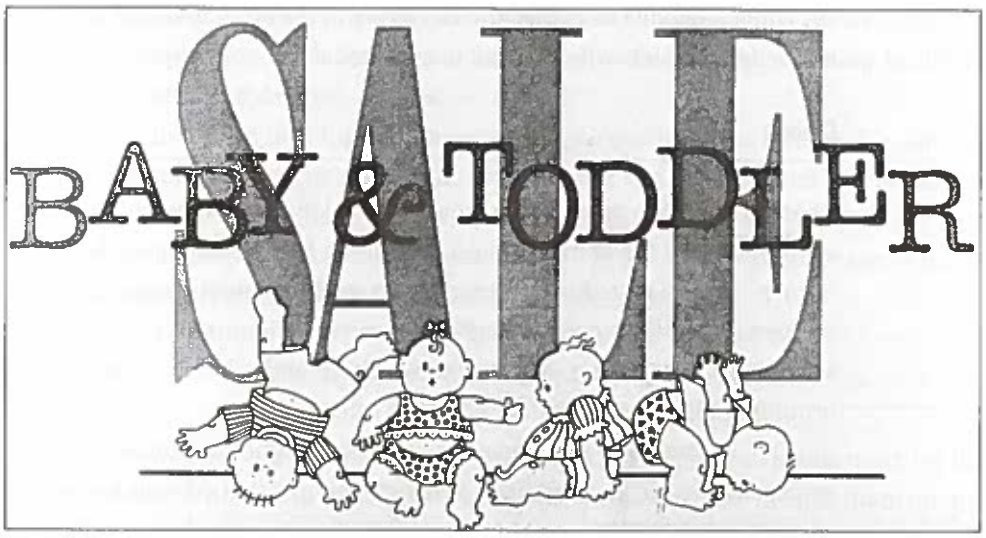

Figure 10.2

be an attendant to look after the car. So, how do we decide that the sign means this when the sign doesn't even have the word *car* on it? We must use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the "meaning" of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended to communicate.

We can illustrate a similar process with our second example (Figure 10.2), taken from a newspaper advertisement. If we only think about the meaning of the phrase as a combination of the meanings of the words, using *Furniture Sale* as an analogy, we might arrive at an interpretation in which someone is announcing the sale of some very young children. Of course, we resist this possible interpretation and recognize instead that it is advertising a sale of clothes for those young children. The word *clothes* doesn't appear in the message, but we can bring that idea to our interpretation of the message as we work out what the advertiser intended us to understand. We are actively involved in creating an interpretation of what we read and hear.

Context

In our discussion of the last two examples, we emphasized the influence of context. There are different kinds of context. There is obviously the **physical context**, which can be the location "out there" where we encounter words and phrases (e.g. the word *BANK* on a wall of a building is understood as a financial institution). There is also the **linguistic context**, also known as **co-text**. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. If the word *bank* is used with other words like *steep* or *overgrown*, we have no problem deciding which type of *bank* is meant.

Or, when someone says that she has to *get to the bank to withdraw some cash*, the co-text tells us which type of *bank* is intended.

Deixis

There are some very common words in our language that can't be interpreted at all if we don't know the context. These are words such as *here* and *there, this* or *that, now* or *then, yesterday, today* or *tomorrow,* as well as pronouns such as *you, me, she, him, it, them.* Some sentences of English are virtually impossible to understand if we don't know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. For example: *You'll have to bring it back tomorrow because she isn't here today.*

Out of context, this sentence is really vague. It contains a large number of expressions (*you, it, tomorrow, she, here, today*) that rely on knowledge of the local context for their interpretation (i.e. that the delivery driver will have to return on February 15th to 660 College Drive with the long box labeled "flowers, handle with care" addressed to Lisa Landry). Expressions such as *tomorrow* and *here* are technically known as **deictic** (/daɪktɪk/) **expressions**, from the Greek word **deixis**, which means "pointing" via language. We use deixis to point to people (*him, them, those things*), places (*here, there, after this*) and times (*now, then, next week*).

Person deixis: *me, you, him, her, us, them, that woman, those idiots*
Spatial deixis: *here, there, beside you, near that, above your head*
Temporal deixis: *now, then, last week, later, tomorrow, yesterday*

All these deictic expressions have to be interpreted in terms of which person, place or time the speaker has in mind. We make a broad distinction between what is close to the speaker (*this, here, now*) and what is distant (*that, there, then*). We can also indicate whether movement is away from the speaker (*go*) or toward the speaker (*come*). Just think about telling someone to *Go to bed* versus *Come to bed.* Deixis can even be entertaining. The bar owner who puts up a big sign that reads *Free Beer Tomorrow* (to get you to return to the bar) can always claim that you are just one day too early for the free drink.

Reference

In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don't refer to anything. People refer. We have to define **reference** as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns (*Chomsky, Jennifer, Whiskas*), other nouns in phrases (*a writer, my friend, the cat*) or pronouns (*he, she, it*). We sometimes assume that these words identify someone or something uniquely, but it is more accurate to say that, for each word or phrase, there is a "range of reference." The words *Jennifer*

or *friend* or *she* can be used to refer to many entities in the world. As we observed earlier, an expression such as *the war* doesn't directly identify anything by itself, because its reference depends on who is using it.

We can also refer to things when we're not sure what to call them. We can use expressions such as *the blue thing* and *that icky stuff* and we can even invent names. For instance, there was a man who always drove his motorcycle fast and loud through my neighborhood and was locally referred to as *Mr. Kawasaki*. In this case, a brand name for a motorcycle is being used to refer to a person.

Inference

As in the "Mr. Kawasaki" example, a successful act of reference depends more on the listener/reader's ability to recognize what the speaker/writer means than on the listener's "dictionary" knowledge of a word that is used. For example, in a restaurant, one waiter can ask another, *Where's the spinach salad sitting?* and receive the reply, *He's sitting by the door.* If you're studying linguistics, you might ask someone, *Can I look at your Chomsky?* and get the response, *Sure, it's on the shelf over there.* And when you hear that *Jennifer is wearing Calvin Klein*, you avoid imagining someone called Calvin draped over poor Jennifer and recognize that they're talking about her clothing.

These examples make it clear that we can use names associated with things (*salad*) to refer to people, and use names of people (*Chomsky, Calvin Klein*) to refer to things. The key process here is called **inference**. An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant. In the *Chomsky* example, the listener has to operate with the inference: "if X is the name of the writer of a book, then X can be used to identify a copy of a book by that writer." Similar types of inferences are necessary to understand someone who says that *Picasso is in the museum*, *We saw Shakespeare in London*, *Mozart was playing in the background* and *The bride wore Giorgio Armani*.

Anaphora

We usually make a distinction between how we introduce new referents (*a puppy*) and how we refer back to them (*the puppy, it*).

We saw a funny home video about a boy washing a puppy in a small bath.
The puppy started struggling and shaking and the boy got really wet.
When he let go, it jumped out of the bath and ran away.

In this type of referential relationship, the second (or subsequent) referring expression is an example of **anaphora** ("referring back"). The first mention is called the **antecedent**. So, in our example, *a boy, a puppy* and *a small bath* are antecedents and *The puppy, the boy, he, it* and *the bath* are anaphoric expressions.

There is a much less common pattern, called **cataphora**, which reverses the antecedent–anaphora relationship by beginning with a pronoun (*It*), then later revealing more specific information. This device is more common in stories, as in this beginning: *It suddenly appeared on the path a little ahead of me, staring in my direction and sniffing the air. An enormous grizzly bear was checking me out.*

Anaphora is, however, the more common pattern and can be defined as subsequent reference to an already introduced entity. Mostly we use anaphora in texts to maintain reference. The connection between an antecedent and an anaphoric expression is created by use of a pronoun (*it*), or a phrase with *the* plus the antecedent noun (*the puppy*), or another noun that is related to the antecedent in some way (*The little dog ran out of the room*). The connection between antecedents and anaphoric expressions is often based on inference, as in these examples:

We found a house to rent, but the kitchen was very small.
I got on a bus and asked the driver if it went near the downtown area.

In the first example, we must make an inference like "if X is a house, then X has a kitchen" in order to interpret the connection between antecedent *a house* and anaphoric expression *the kitchen*. In the second example, we must make an inference like "if X is a bus, then X has a driver" in order to make the connection between *a bus* and *the driver*. In some cases, the antecedent can be a verb, as in: *The victim was shot twice, but the gun was never recovered*. Here the inference is that any "shooting" event must involve a gun.

We have used the term "inference" here to describe what the listener (or reader) does. When we talk about an assumption made by the speaker (or writer), we usually talk about a "presupposition."

Presupposition

When we use a referring expression like *this*, *he* or *Jennifer*, we usually assume that our listeners can recognize which referent is intended. In a more general way, we design our linguistic messages on the basis of large-scale assumptions about what our listeners already know. Some of these assumptions may be mistaken, of course, but mostly they're appropriate. What a speaker (or writer) assumes is true or known by a listener (or reader) can be described as a **presupposition**.

If someone tells you *Your brother is waiting outside*, there is an obvious presupposition that you have a brother. If you are asked *Why did you arrive late?*, there is a presupposition that you did arrive late. And if you are asked the question *When did you stop smoking?*, there are at least two presuppositions involved. In asking this question, the speaker presupposes that you used to smoke and that you no longer do so. Questions like this, with built-in presuppositions, are very useful devices for interrogators or trial lawyers. If the defendant is asked by the prosecutor, *Okay,*

Mr. Buckingham, how fast were you going when you went through the red light?, there is a presupposition that Mr. Buckingham did in fact go through the red light. If he simply answers the *How fast* part of the question, by giving a speed, he is behaving as if the presupposition is correct.

One of the tests used to check for the presuppositions underlying sentences involves negating a sentence with a particular presupposition and checking if the presupposition remains true. Whether you say *My car is a wreck* or the negative version *My car is not a wreck*, the underlying presupposition (*I have a car*) remains true despite the fact that the two sentences have opposite meanings. This is called the "constancy under negation" test for identifying a presupposition. If someone says, *I used to regret marrying him, but I don't regret marrying him now*, the presupposition (*I married him*) remains constant even though the verb *regret* changes from affirmative to negative.

Speech acts

We have been considering ways in which we interpret the meaning of an utterance in terms of what the speaker intended to convey. We have not yet considered the fact that we usually know how the speaker intends us to "take" (or "interpret the function of") what is said. In very general terms, we can usually recognize the type of "action" performed by a speaker with the utterance. We use the term **speech act** to describe actions such as "requesting," "commanding," "questioning" or "informing." We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance. If you say, *I'll be there at six*, you are not just speaking, you seem to be performing the speech act of "promising."

Direct and indirect speech acts

We usually use certain syntactic structures with the functions listed beside them in Table 10.1.

TABLE 10.1

	Structures	Functions
Did you eat the pizza?	Interrogative	Question
Eat the pizza (please)!	Imperative	Command (Request)
You ate the pizza.	Declarative	Statement

When an interrogative structure such as *Did you . . .?*, *Are they . . .?* or *Can we . . .?* is used with the function of a question, it is described as a **direct speech act**. For example, when we don't know something and we ask someone to provide the information, we produce a direct speech act such as *Can you ride a bicycle?*.

Compare that utterance with *Can you pass the salt?*. In this second example, we are not really asking a question about someone's ability. In fact, we don't normally

use this structure as a question at all. We normally use it to make a request. That is, we are using a structure associated with the function of a question, but in this case with the function of a request. This is an example of an **indirect speech act**. Whenever one of the structures in the set above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it on the same line, the result is an indirect speech act.

The utterance *You left the door open* has a declarative structure and, as a direct speech act, would be used to make a statement. However, if you say this to someone who has just come in (and it's cold outside), you would probably want that person to close the door. You aren't using the imperative structure. You are using a declarative structure to make a request. It's another indirect speech act.

It is possible to have strange effects if one person fails to recognize another person's indirect speech act. Consider the following scene. A visitor to a city, carrying his luggage, looking lost, stops a passer-by.

VISITOR: *Excuse me. Do you know where the Ambassador Hotel is?*
PASSER-BY: *Oh sure, I know where it is.* (and walks away)

In this scene, the visitor uses a form normally associated with a question (*Do you know . . .?*), and the passer-by answers that question literally (*I know . . .*). That is, the passer-by is acting as if the utterance was a direct speech act instead of an indirect speech act used as a request for directions.

The main reason we use indirect speech acts seems to be that actions such as requests, presented in an indirect way (*Could you open that door for me?*), are generally more polite in our society than direct speech acts (*Open that door for me!*). Exactly why they are more polite is based on some complex assumptions.

Politeness

We can think of politeness in general terms as having to do with ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. In the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is "face." Your **face**, in pragmatics, is your public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. **Politeness** can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of another person's face.

If you say something that represents a threat to another person's self-image, that is called a **face-threatening act**. For example, if you use a direct speech act to get someone to do something (*Give me that paper!*), you are behaving as if you have more social power than the other person. If you don't actually have that social power (e.g. you're not a military officer or prison warden), then you are performing a face-threatening act. An indirect speech act, in the form associated with a question (*Could you pass me that paper?*), removes the assumption of social power. You're only asking

if it's possible. This makes your request less threatening to the other person's face. Whenever you say something that lessens the possible threat to another's face, it can be described as a **face-saving act**.

Negative and positive face

We have both a negative face and a positive face. (Note that "negative" doesn't mean "bad" here, it's simply the opposite of "positive.") **Negative face** is the need to be independent and free from imposition. **Positive face** is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of the group. So, a face-saving act that emphasizes a person's negative face will show concern about imposition (*I'm sorry to bother you . . .*; *I know you're busy, but . . .*). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person's positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a common goal (*Let's do this together . . .*; *You and I have the same problem, so . . .*).

Ideas about the appropriate language to mark politeness differ substantially from one culture to the next. If you have grown up in a culture that has directness as a valued way of showing solidarity, and you use direct speech acts (*Give me that chair!*) to people whose culture is more oriented to indirectness and avoiding direct imposition, then you will be considered impolite. You, in turn, may think of the others as vague and unsure of whether they really want something or are just asking about it (*Are you using this chair?*). In either case, it is the pragmatics that is misunderstood and, unfortunately, more will often be communicated than is said.

Understanding how successful communication works is actually a process of interpreting not just what speakers say, but what they "intend to mean." We'll explore other aspects of this process in Chapter 11.