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Pragmatics: The Cornerstone of Linguistic Exploration in the 21st Century *(Pp.41-51)*

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Abstract

This study investigates into the relevance of context in the interpretation of linguistic entities. Pragmatics, a field concerned with the study of language in relation to the context, was earlier conceived as a 'waste-basket' or "a rag-bag into which recalcitrant data could be conveniently stuffed, and where it could be equally conveniently forgotten" (1983:1). This study shows that Pragmatics, notwithstanding its earlier misconception, remains at the moment the engine room and cornerstone of any viable linguistic exploration in this twenty-first century. The interdisciplinary nature of pragmatics substantiates and justifies the capacity of pragmatics to provide answers to questions which hitherto could not be answered in linguistics. It is obvious from this study that not all interdisciplinary approaches cast such a wide net around all that is of interest to the understanding of the functioning of language as pragmatics. Thus, It is important to note that the interdisciplinarity of the origin and nature of pragmatics is relevant to the study of linguistics in the twenty-first century because it gives us the impetus to resort to the different areas of human endeavours and other contextual variables in a bit to arrive at a comprehensive and communicative meaning of linguistic units.

Key Words:

"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone" (Psalm 118:22)

Introduction

Pragmatics, in simple parlance, refers to the study of language use. The fact that man uses language to carryout different activities is as old as man himself. However, the first fundamental scholarly attempt to study language beyond its formal abstract entities to such depth as its use, properties and processes can be attributed to the works of Morris (1938; 1946) and Carnap (1942). These scholars proposed a threefold classification of semiotics (the study of sign): Syntactics (syntax) which deals with "combination of signs without regard for their specific significations or their relations to the behaviour in which they occur"; Semantics which deals with "the signification of signs in all modes of signifying", and Pragmatics as "that portion of semiotics which deals with the origin, uses, and effects of signs within the behaviour in which they occur" (Morris 218-19). Carnap underscores this tripartite classification in words that do not need further qualification:

> If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker or, to put it in more general terms, to the user of the language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics… if we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expressions and their designata, we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze only the relations between the expressions, we are in (logical) syntax.(1942:9)

The field of pragmatics, unfortunately, began to be treated with disdain especially in the late 1960s. Writing on the pitiable plight of this field in those years, Leech recalls with nostalgia that in the late 1960s, pragmatics was mentioned by linguists rarely, if at all with disdain. In his words: "In those far-off-seeming days, pragmatics tended to be treated as a rag-bag into which recalcitrant data could be conveniently stuffed, and where it could be equally conveniently forgotten" (1983:1). This disdain appears to have been due to the abstract nature with which pragmatics was associated.

However, in recent times, many would argue that we cannot really understand the nature of language itself unless we understand pragmatics: how language is used in communication. For instance, Verschueren observes that "the once popular 'waste-basket' view of pragmatics (Bar-Hillel, 1971), assigning to pragmatics the task of dealing with whatever syntax and semantics could not properly cope with, will be radically left behind." (1999:11). This is as a result of the "successive discoveries by linguists that

what has gone headlong into the rag-bag can be taken out again and sewed and patched into a more or less presentable suit of clothes" (Leech, 1983: 1). This pride of place that has now been accorded to the field of pragmatics wholesomely encapsulates the biblical allusion at the outset of this discourse.

Tracing the history of pragmatics, Leech declares that to the generation which followed Bloomfield, linguistics meant phonetics, phonemics, and if one was daring-morphophonemics; but syntax was considered so abstract as to be "virtually beyond the horizon of discovery". All this changed when Chomsky's theory of the centrality of syntax was propounded in 1957; but meaning was not yet important to Chomsky and such theorists like J. Fillmore (1968). Later, some pro-Chomskyean theorists like Katz, Fodor, and Postal (1963 and 1964) began to incorporate meaning into a formal linguistic theory. The enthusiasm to study meaning was further propelled by Chomsky's concept of "ambiguity" and "synonymy."

Further interests in the study of language (Ross and Lakoff in 1960s) revealed that meaning could not be viewed merely from the abstract concrete system of language but from the use of language in other social contexts. And with this new view of language, pragmatics was born. Pragmatics therefore, developed as a reaction to the purely formalist approach to language.

Several definitions of pragmatics exist, but like most academic fields, a satisfactory definition of pragmatics is rarely available. One quite restricted scope of pragmatics that has been propounded is that specifically aimed at capturing the concern of pragmatics with features of language structure: "Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language" (Levinson, 1983: 9).

Putting it another way, one could say that pragmatics is the study of just those aspects of the relationship between language and contexts that are relevant to the writing of grammars. This definition would exclude the study of the principles of language use that can be shown to have repercussions on the grammar of languages. This is not sustainable because it excludes those principles of language use and interpretation that explain how meaning is 'read into' utterances without actually being encoded in them. In underscoring the relevance of the principles of language use, Alabi submits that: "… if an adequate interpretation of a text which is open to objective verification is desirable, it is imperative that a measure of attention is paid to

the circumstance which surrounds the use into which language has been put in a particular way, textually and contextually" (2002:158).

Contrary to the conception of pragmatics as restricted to features of language structure is that which restricts the scope of pragmatics as concerned solely with the principles of language use, and has nothing to do with the description of language structure. According to Katz: "… Pragmatic theories, in contrast [to Grammars], do nothing to explicate the structure of linguistic constructions or grammatical properties and relations … They explicate the reasoning of speakers and hearers in working out the correlation in a context of a sentence token with a proposition. In this sense, a pragmatic theory is part of performance" (1977:19).
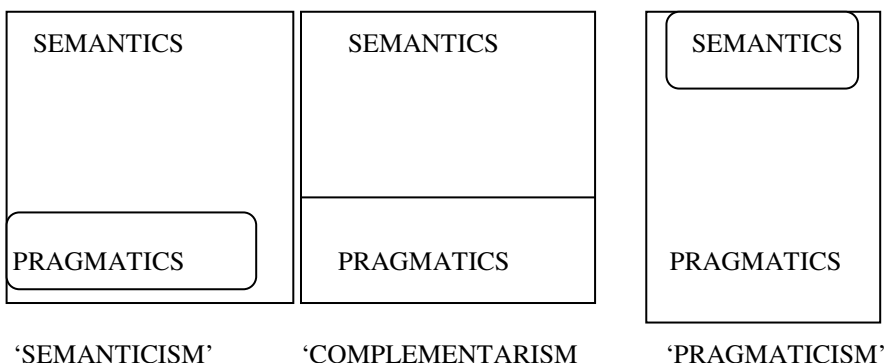
This approach to the definition of pragmatics underscores the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage properties and processes. Adegbija comprehensively captures the usage properties and processes of pragmatics and avers that:

> [Pragmatics is] the study of language use in particular communicative contexts or situations…This would take cognisance of the message being communicated, or the speech act being performed; the participants involved; their intention, knowledge of the world and the impacts of these on their interaction; what they have taken for granted as part of the context… the deductions they make on the basis of context; what is said or left unsaid; the impacts of non-verbal aspects of interactions of meanings. (1999:189)

It is important to observe in relation to these different conceptions of pragmatics in terms of its usage properties that such definitions fail to draw attention to the unifying characteristics of pragmatic phenomena. This is because the process of any pragmatic endeavour lies in its empirically descriptive and interpretive potential of analysing distinctive features in a language text i.e. taking cognisance of syntax, semantics and the aspects of speech situations. Furthermore, the conception of pragmatics only in terms of its usage properties undermines the fact that aspects of linguistic structure sometimes directly encode or otherwise interact with features of the context, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a neat boundary between context-independent grammar (competence) and context dependent interpretation (performance).

Comrie (1981:26) observes that "when one looks at pragmatic explanation, however, there are certain instances, where there seems to be a clearer correlation between properties of language structure and properties of language use in human communities" (1981:26). In the same vein, Levinson observes that "pragmaticists are specifically interested in the interrelation of language structure and the principles of language usage."(1983:9)

Leech in his approach to the study of language identifies three options open to linguists in their quest for a more broadly conceived, more comprehensive and perhaps more satisfying purview of meaning in language: These are graphically represented below:

SEMANTICS	SEMANTICS	SEMANTICS
PRAGMATICS	PRAGMATICS	PRAGMATICS
'SEMANTICISM'	'COMPLEMENTARISM	'PRAGMATICISM'

Adapted from Leech (1983:6)

i. Semanticism is a meaning system in language which prioritises a semantic account of meaning at the expense of pragmatics.

ii. Pragmaticism, on the other hand, prioritises a pragmatic account of meaning at the expense of a semantic account of meaning.

iii. Complementarism shows that in a broadly connected system of meaning, both pragmatics and semantics complement each other.

In subscribing to complementarism, Leech argues that "grammar (the abstract formal system of language) and pragmatics (the principles of language use) are complementary domains within linguistics" (1983:4).

Similarly, in pursuit of complementarism, Verschueren identifies and assigns four clear tasks to pragmatic descriptions and explanations. These four

'tasks' or 'angles' of investigation, which do not constitute separable topics of investigation but which should be seen as focal points in one coherent pragmatic approach to language use, are the following:

i.   Contextual correlates of adaptability have to be identified. These potentially include all the ingredients of the communicative context with which linguistic choices have to be interadaptable.

ii. The processes in question have to be situated with reference to the different structural objects of adaptability, including structures at any layer or level of organisation (e.g. morpheme, word, sentence, etc.) as well as principles of structuring.

iii. Any pragmatic description or explanation must account for the dynamics of adaptability as manifested in the phenomenon under investigation. It involves an account of the actual functioning or unfolding of the adaptive processes in interaction. That is, questions have to be answered about the ways in which communication principles and strategies are used in the making and negotiating of choices of production and interpretation.

iv. We have to take into cognisance differences in the salience of the adaptation processes, the status of these processes in relation to the cognitive apparatus. Not all choices, whether in production or interpretation, are made equally consciously or purposefully. Some are virtually automatic, others are highly motivated. They involve different ways of processing in the medium of adaptability, the human 'mind in society'. With reference to this issue, the distinction between explicitly communicated meaning and implicit information takes on special relevance. Salience is basically a function of the operation of the reflexive awareness involved in language use.

Verschueren observes that these four tasks for pragmatic investigation are not to be situated at par with each other. Their contributions are not only complementary; they have different functional loads to carry within the overall framework of the pragmatic perspective. This is because the general concern for the study of pragmatics is to understand the meaningful functioning of language as a dynamic process operating on the context-structure relationship at various levels of salience as illustrated below:
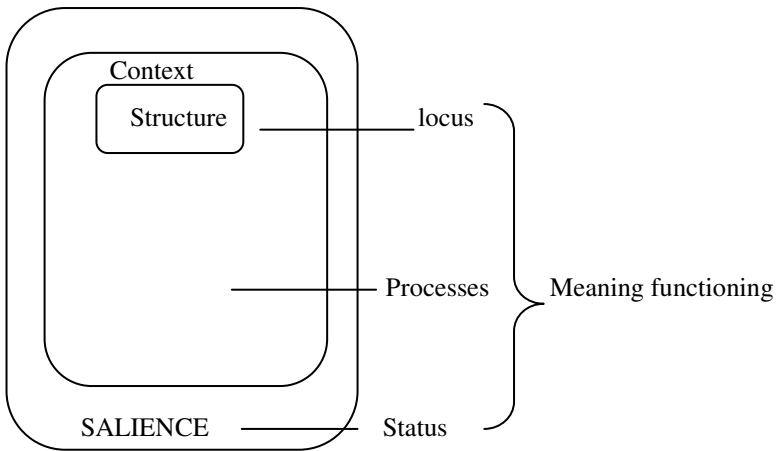
The Structure of the Pragmatic Theory Adapted from Verschueren (1999:67)

The Pragmatic theory above recognizes the complementary relationship between the sense (literal meaning) of a text deducible from the semantic implication of the syntactic form used, and the illocutionary force deducible from the motivated principles and the context of the utterance. Thus, to arrive at a comprehensive meaning of a text one needs to take into cognizance the sense of the utterance; the textual and interpersonal principles that apply to it; and the context of the utterance. This can be arrived at via implicatures. Adegbite identifies "lack (i.e. of the mastery of the language system; of ability to match forms with functions; of conventional rules guiding social behaviour; of knowledge or mismatch of objects or people; and of cooperation between speaker-hearer) as causative agents of pragmatic failure" (2001:7).

It is important to note at this juncture that pragmatics is interdisciplinary in origin and nature. This is because a number of traditions have contributed, individually and collectively to the formation of the field of pragmatics. Schmidt (1974:7) recognises the interdisciplinary nature of the field of pragmatics and argues that:

> 'Pragmatics', whether as a component of a linguistic theory or as a new kind of theory of linguistic communication, has to rely on close cooperation with other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, logic and mathematics, information and system theory, Jurisprudence, literary science etc (Verschueren, 1999:262).

It is important to note that this interdisciplinarity of the field of pragmatics is informed by the interdisciplinary nature of its origin and development. Let us examine some of the contributions to the field of pragmatics.

Philosophy has provided some of the most fertile ideas in pragmatics. The philosophy of language has produced two of the main theories underlying present-day pragmatics. The first one is Speech Act theory, originally formulated by an Oxford language philosopher, Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). The second is the 'logic of conversation' (Grice, 1975). Together, they provided the frame of reference to the consolidation of the field of pragmatics.

Some other trends in sociology and anthropology soon came to be associated with pragmatics as well. This was particularly the case for two traditions. First, the anthropologically oriented "ethnography of communication," initiated by Gumperz and Hymes (1972), has remained an attempt to study language use in context. Second, there was the sociological tradition of 'ethnomethodology', initiated by Garfinkel (1967), which produced the ever-widening field of 'conversation analysis' (e.g. Sacks et al, 1974). What these two traditions have produced, in conjunction, is for instance, a highly dynamic notion of context which is destined to remain a building block for theory formation in pragmatics in the years ahead.

Psychology and cognitive science had been involved all along. Buhler's (1934) theory of the psychology of language, especially by means of the distinctions it makes between various functions of language, has been directly or indirectly present in most pragmatic thinking. Recently, we were reminded that the real aim of cognitive science was 'to prompt psychology to join forces with its sister interpretive discipline in the humanities and in the social sciences' to study 'acts of meaning' (Bruner, 1990:2), a quintessentially pragmatic concept.

So far we have not mentioned any formative traditions which have their roots in linguistics as such. There are at least two that cannot be ignored, though even these will be shown to have connections beyond the "purely" linguistic

study of language. First, there is a distinctly 'French School of Pragmatics', with roots in the work of Benveniste (1966) and with Ducrot (1972; 1973; 1980) as its most outspoken proponent. Benveniste's main thesis was fundamentally pragmatic: "Nihil est in lingua quod non prius fuerit in oratione" (roughly, 'there is nothing in language that was not first in language use'). His work was clearly influenced by British analytical philosophy; as in Ducrot's by the later developments of speech act theory.

Second, we should not forget the tradition of Firthian linguistics, hinging on a view of speech as 'a social instrument both for "sense" and "nonsense", work and play-practical, productive, creative' (Firth, 1964:15) and, following in Malinowski's footsteps, refusing to look at language outside of a 'context of situation'. Today, most functional approaches in linguistics have direct or indirect historical roots in Firthian linguistics or the Prague School or both (e.g. Halliday 1973; Dik 1978). They have produced fully-fledged pragmatically oriented theories of grammar such as Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional grammar.

It can be deduced from the discussions so far that not all interdisciplinary approaches cast such a wide net around all that is of interest to the understanding of the functioning of language as pragmatics. Language use involves conscious or unconscious linguistic choices from the linguistic possibilities available to suit the enterprise its users engage themselves in. This implies the existence of certain peculiarities in the use of language by individuals who find themselves in different fields of human endeavours. In Moody's view "all human beings have developed techniques of communication by means of language, and different communities have developed their own peculiar characteristics" (1). Choices are made both in producing and interpreting an utterance and both types of choices are of equal importance to the flow of communication and the way in which meaning is generated. The forms which linguistic units take depend, to a large extent, on the communication needs of its users. Ajulo (1994:4) in his work, Approaching Effective Communication, underscores this view – "…the social and linguistic rules which guide effective communication require that individuals or groups engaged in communication, select approximately the 'forms' that most suitably lead to or facilitate the achievement of the various objectives of their communication".

Conclusion

It is important to note that the interdisciplinarity of the origin and nature of pragmatics is relevant to the study of linguistics in the twenty-first century because it gives us the impetus to resort to the different areas of human endeavours aforementioned in a bit to arrive at a comprehensive and communicative meaning of linguistic units. Pragmatics, notwithstanding its earlier misconception as a "wastebasket" or "ragbag into which recalcitrant data could be conveniently stuffed and where it could be equally conveniently forgotten", remains at the moment the engine room and cornerstone of any viable and meaningful linguistic exploration in this twenty-first century.

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