ASPECTS OF PRAGMATICS
IN A PROCEDURAL THEORY OF DISCOURSE

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1. DISCOURSE AND PRAGMATICS

By a discourse theory we understand, following Widdowson (1979, 1984), a theory of making meaning through a negotiation process of some sort (eg. between interlocutors). A discourse theory is to be understood as a theory of meaning as a whole, where the full communicative value of any utterance can be made manifest, even going as far as to include considerations of non-verbal behaviour.

The whole range of consequences arising out of this standpoint is naturally beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, a brief outline of some of the aspects relevant to such a theoretical approach will be attempted. This will preferably be done from the point of view of the interplay between pragmatics and a procedural theory of meaning.

A discourse theory, being related to a theory of communication (Gumperz, 1982), should be primarily concerned with the language user and the way he makes use of all available linguistic resources in order to make meaning. Pragmatics is precisely a branch of linguistic inquiry essentially centred on the language user. It deals , among other things, with the type of options he makes, the use constraints imposed by interaction and the effect caused upon other people in the communication process.

2. DEFINING PRAGMATICS

One possible and widely supported definition of pragmatics runs as follows (see Levinson 1983:24) :

Pragmatics is the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate

This line of thinking would be favoured by such linguists as van Dijk (1976), Allwood, Anderson and Dahl (1977), Lyons (1977), and philosophers like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). According to a more restricted and not so favoured view, pragmatics would be the study of only those relations between language and context which are already encoded in the structure of a language. The study of deixis and honorifics would be typical issues of this approach, thus leaving aside other representative subjects like implicature, presupposition and speech acts. There are other definitions we will not go into here (for a fairly exhaustive account, see Levinson, 1983). The two views mentioned may be considered opposite cases.

According to Levinson (1983:25) , the most favoured definition is confronted with four major problems which I quote:

This definition would have as a consequence exact identity with a sociolinguistics construed, in the manner of Hymes (1971), as the study of *communicative competence*

It requires a fundamental idealization of a culturally homogeneous speech community

Such a definition would make the data of pragmatics stand in quite an abstract relation to what is actually observable in language use

Pragmatic constraints are generally defeasible, or not invariable

The ensuing discussion is intended to help us see the far-fetchedness of the previous objections. The first three are related to the idealization and standardization issue in linguistics. It is currently admitted that one of the major contributions of pragmatics has been to direct attention to actual language use in direct contrast to one basic tenet of generative grammarians: reference to an ideal speaker/hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who is unaffected by any performance limitations (see Chomsky, 1965).

In fact, standardization, it might be argued, is in principle a natural consequence of any organized attempt to analyse any given phenomenon. But what should be at stake is not whether such standardization is essentially correct or not, but rather whether or to what extent it might leave out any relevant aspect of the object of study. That is exactly the case with generative-transformational grammar, which deals with rules. That is why abstraction is needed. But pragmatics is not rule-governed; it is principle-controlled, and principles are not standardized in a strict

sense since they are not absolute but scalar in nature. The definition only states that which is obviously true : pragmatics accounts for the fact that language users know how to make their linguistic output situationally relevant. Levinson erroneously argues that sometimes speakers do not want to be appropriate (they want to be outrageous, for example). But that has nothing to do with the notion of appropriateness implied in the definition, which is obviously context-oriented. We could say that being "inappropriate" is in some situations a way of being appropriate, depending on the goals of the speaker.

Then, Levinson suggests (fourth problem) that any pragmatic implication of an utterance can be cancelled by contextual factors and so we are liable to wrongly predict conditions of usage. For example, the verb *regret* presupposes that its complement is true. The sentence *John doesn't regret cheating* could only be appropriately used in contexts where it is believed that John has cheated. But we could devise a context in which that sentence might be appropriately used and it is not assumed that John cheated : for example , "you thought he had cheated, asked me whether he now repents, but I tell you he never did, and persuade you accordingly, and then I say *So John doesn't regret cheating* " (Levinson 1983:26). Levinson is, therefore, suggesting that a pragmaticist must have the goal of anticipating usage conditions, when his role is , in fact, to account for the mechanisms which guide such conditions. In the example given before, *John doesn't regret cheating* , the pragmaticist would first consider the context of situation (in Firth's sense of the term; see Firth, 1957), and then he would proceed to describe how the utterance matches up with the context. It seems that Levinson's way of interpreting presupposition , in the present case, is semantic rather than strictly pragmatic.

3. PRAGMATICS, COMPETENCE AND CAPACITY

The definition under scrutiny here equates pragmatics with a certain ability, on the part of the language user, which does not have a lot to do with Chomsky's *competence*. In this connection, Widdowson (1984:246) makes a distinction between *competence* (knowledge of a linguistic code) and *capacity* (the ability to exploit linguistic resources so as to create meaning, whether codified or not) :

The human capacity for making meaning out of linguistic resources is not, then, confined within competence. Nor is it simply converted into competence in the language acquisition process... . We are led to believe that the creative force is channelled into a code and finds expression only in the production of sentences

according to rule. But the fact that we are able to produce and interpret utterances which do violence to such rules makes it clear that creative capacity has an independent existence.

Pragmatics could be related to language capacity. This overrules Levinson's first objection according to which there is a degree of overlap between the definition of pragmatics given above and Hymes's concept of communicative competence. This latter term is to be taken as a widening of the scope of Chomsky's competence to make it include the ability not only to make grammatically correct but also situationally adecuate sentences. For example, the notion of communicative competence would first account for the language user's correct understanding of the lexical items and the grammatical relations in the sentence *It's cold in here* ; then it would tell us how in certain contexts it can be interpreted as a request for action amounting to something like *Please, could you close the door?* (or any other reading). But the language user is by no means restricted to a mere pairing of sentences with contexts. There are different degrees of politeness, emotivity, irony and the like he can also handle, thus becoming able to exert influence on people. This is naturally achieved through a diversity of linguistic resources which language itself is constantly shaping and moulding according to pragmatic needs.

This "pragmatics" game, in which a language user's capacity is exhibited, is played according to a series of procedural principles. In this line, the proposed definition of pragmatics might be (provisionally) refashioned as follows :

Pragmatics is the study of a language user's capacity to produce context-related utterances

The definition I am proposing is not flawless, since it seems to ignore such meaning-related factors as non-verbal behaviour, but it takes account of the principles at work in the creation of discourse. I believe that it is of the utmost importance to explore the way we use such principles when we want to communicate. And that would amount to investigating into the nature of language capacity.

4. PRAGMATICS AND WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Most pragmatic theories assume the existence of a certain type of mutual knowledge between speaker and hearer. Part of it is pragmatic, but part of it should also be, in principle, separable from pure pragmatic knowledge. This latter special type of knowledge, which pragmaticists largely take for granted, is essential for communication to take place. If we consider, for example, Grice's definition of

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implicature[1], we will be able to see how it presupposes various types of knowledge shared by speaker and hearer (see Grice, 1957, 1975) :

1- Knowledge of the cooperative principle and its maxims.
2- Knowledge of the implicatures deriving from the application of the maxims.
3- Knowledge of the conventional content of the sentences.
4- Knowledge of the context of situation.
5-Certain previous knowledge regarding the truth-value of the conventional content of the sentences uttered.

The two first types are pragmatic knowledge. Type three would be grammatical (semantic) knowledge. Type four and type five are supporting knowledge of some other sort (mainly situational since truth values are tied to certain states of affairs or possible worlds). And I would like to suggest that there is still one further related type which has been mostly ignored in pragmatic acounts even though it is essential for an understanding of language capacity. As an illustration of this type, let us take (see Leech, 1983:92) an explanation of the notion of *bridging assumption* as formulated by Clark and Haviland (1974, 1977) :

A : In the end we got through *the back door*
B : Did you have to break *the lock* ?

In order for *B*''s answer to be relevant, it must be assumed that the door has a lock and that this lock is what prevented *A* from entering. This is also a case of mutual knowledge which cannot be sufficiently dealt with on a sole consideration of propositional content. There is not only the (pragmatic) presupposition that there is a back door, but also the (non-pragmatic) presupposition that the door has a lock. That doors usually have locks is not pragmatically inferrable, strictly speaking[1]. Understanding here can only be achieved on the basis of both interlocutors' previous experience. If such were not the case, the above exchange would be meaningless.

The special knowledge domain suggested here has been approached by many authors (Anderson and Bower, 1972, 1973; Kintsch, 1977; Graesser, 1981; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978, among others). In all cases, the underlying notion is , with different labels, the same : whatever they are and no matter how they work, the mechanisms for linguistic processing operate on the basis of some sort of previous knowledge. This is the origin of what has been variously termed schemata (Graesser, 1981), schemas (Winograd, 1977), frames (Minsky, 1975; van Dijk, 1977), plans, and scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977). Generally speaking, schemas and frames are roughly the same : cognitive structures for storing memories of our

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knowledge of the world. They are organised frameworks which help us in our interpretation of everything around us, including speech events. Plans and scripts are stereotyped sequences of predictable actions; plans are directed to a goal and scripts are situational.

One related notion to that of schema -not found in the literature on the subject- is that of Pearce's *episode*. An episode is a combination of the notions of frame and script, although this concept is established as a communicative unit :

When two people communicate, the Episodes$_1$, which they have learned from their cultures provide them with a repertoire of patterns of actions which they may assume are common to both.... . From this repertoire, both persons select and/or construct the Episode$_2$ which reflects their particular interpretation of what they want to enact or what they feel is appropriate. As each person begins to enact his Episode$_2$, the combination of both their actions structure Episode$_3$ (1976: 22).

Pearce's Episode$_1$ is what we have already termed knowledge of the world or world knowledge, which is structured according to a number of different domains (Graesser, 1981). Thus, Pearce emphasizes the fact that the communicative act generates a whole interpretive process based both on frames of reference which come from our previous experience with similar situations and on our grammatical knowledge (Tannen, 1977). People decide how to make sense of utterances in terms of familiar schematic frames which they can identify. This process would shape Pearce's Episode$_2$.[2] The coordination and -we must suppose- gradual modification of the episodes of the different participants results in a negotiation of meaning which structures Episode$_3$.

There are, therefore, two distinct knowledge domains, apart from grammar, which seem to be relevant to the discourse process. One is organizative in nature (schemata) and could be considered part of the communicative competence of the language user. The other is pragmatic and pertains to capacity, the ability to make meaning on the basis of competence. Pragmatics can therefore be considered some sort of bridge between schematic knowledge and particular situations according to the language user's goals. Sometimes, a language user may be confronted with a decontextualized text or sentence. His language capacity, in such a case, will direct him to find a contextual frame of some kind which may act as a substitute for a real context of situation. That might be called a *schematic context* since it will solely be based solely on his knowledge of the world and the different textual clues. Let us take the following sentence :

These were the first lusty stirrings of a young giant

Our linguistic competence falls short of what we need to make sense of it. It can help us to find the relationships between the sentence constituents and to postulate

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a set of alternative meanings for each word according to semantic and syntactic constraints. Still, we are left wondering, what does it mean? . Without a contextual frame of reference, it is deprived of full significance. The only way out seems to be to make up a set of possible (fictitious) alternative contexts. If that were the case we would precisely be making use of our background knowledge or knowledge of the world. In its original text, the above sentence refers to the beginnings of the oil industry (the young giant). But the sentence might as well have been found somewhere else (in a folk tale, for example).

Then, once we find the frame of reference, we need to engage the necessary interpretive procedures. It might be suggested, by way of illustration, that the key principle at work in interpreting the young-giant sentence is the *maxim of relation* from Grice's *Cooperative Principle*. This maxim is concerned with the relevance of a message. One has to assume that the author of the sentence is going to write coherently or otherwise he might be misunderstood. So we engage upon our schema about the oil industry which we probably envisage as a huge enterprise. At the same time we are able to draw from our knowledge of giants those features which can be matched up with those of the former schema. And we intuitively establish the connection. That might be part of the decoding process. However, there is always more than one principle at work. The interpretation process of the above sentence involves much more time than would be expected from the natural tendency of language users to be quick and easy (*economy principle*). In the present case the writer seems to have preferred expressivity (we could talk about an *expressivity principle*) at the expense of economy.

5. SCHEMATA AND PROCEDURES : A VIEW OF FUNCTIONAL SYSTEMS

Widdowson (1983,1984) has suggested the existence of two different types of schemata: *ideational* (similar to Minsky's frames) and *interpersonal* (similar to Schank and Abelson's scripts and plans). This has obviously been inspired by Halliday's discussion on the functions of language, with the appealing implication that world knowledge and functional patterns run parallel. This is due to the fact, one may suppose, that both schemata and language functions are semantic in nature (they are meaning-oriented).

The parallel between language functions and grammar components, on the other hand, is commonplace in systemic grammar (Halliday, 1970, 1973, 1978; Kress, 1976). Language is envisaged as a social phenomenon which is to be approached in relation to its function within a larger social system. Its structure serves and is determined by its function.

Now, the three-fold parallel functions/grammar/schemata is all the more attractive to anyone working from either the formalist or the functionalist point of view. A similar organizational pattern in both approaches is suggested, and great simplicity is achieved. There is, however, one disturbing question about all this. Halliday's functional account establishes a third *textual* function. Are there textual schemata? And if so, are they related to frames, to scripts, or to neither? A brief review of Halliday's functional system will shed light on the problem. The ideational function shows language expressing content; the interpersonal function shows how language serves to establish and maintain social relations (expression of one's attitudes and influence on other people); the textual function shows language constructing cohesive texts (see Halliday and Hasan, 1976). This latter formulation ignores contextual matters. For that reason, it has been suggested (Brown and Yule, 1983) that the textual component reflecting the textual function should be made to include them. However, this may prove a rather poor solution to the problem. The question is essentially one of confusion between levels of description. The textual component is certainly semantically relevant inasmuch as it deals with such matters as thematization, information and cohesion, but we do have a right to wonder what kind of meaning level it really represents. That the textual function is a bizarre notion is readily seen from a number of criticisms. Take this comment by Widdowson as an example :

According to Halliday it [i.e. the textual function] provides the means whereby language makes links with itself so that individual senetnces are fused into texts. This oddly anthropomorphic notion seems to be at variance with the descriptions of the other functions, which are based on human agency (1984:71)

Indeed, language cannot be said to have the function of transmitting itself through texts (Leech,1983:57). It is texts that have the function of transmitting language. The textual component is eminently communicative. This has led Widdowson to consider the textual function as part of a wider *communicative function* :

The adjustment of propositions so that they fit into the changing situation of shared knowledge is the 'textual' aspect of the matter. The use of such propositions to conduct social business, to perform illocutions of different kinds is the 'interpersonal' aspect of the matter. Both are features of the communicative function of language (1984:71)

However, this view is only partially correct. I would like to suggest that the two aspects mentioned by Widdowson are not functional but pragmatic. They are but part of the system of procedural principles which guide the creation of discourse.

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For that reason, they are not semantic, strictly speaking. Widdowson's communicative function has elements belonging both to a textual and to an interpersonal rhetoric in pragmatics (these terms are explained in Leech, 1983).

When Bühler (1934) studied the functions of language, basing his model on the analysis of the components of the communicative act, he proposed three: the *emotive*, the *conative* and the *referential* functions (corresponding to sender, receiver and referent, respectively). The emotive and conative functions can be matched to Halliday's interpersonal function (with a personal and an interactional component); the referential function can be related to the ideational function. Different starting points for the analysis have yielded very close results. Then in Jakobson's (1960) modification of this earlier scheme, three new constitutive factors of the speech event were postulated: message, code and contact, thus giving rise to the *poetic*, *metalingual* and *phatic* functions. It seems apparent that the poetic and metalingual functions, centred upon the message and the code, resemble certain aspects of the textual function, and of course could be related to the maxims of a textual rhetoric such as that proposed by Leech (1983). The phatic function, in turn, would be interpersonal inasmuch as it has nothing to do with the conveying of information but with the establishing and maintaining of social contact (expressions like, *Nice day, isn't it?*). In fact, it has a lot to do with the politeness principle of the interpersonal rhetoric.

Again the problem seems to be one of mixing up different levels of description. However, if we bear in mind the separation between pragmatic knowledge and schematic knowledge proposed earlier, we may be able to clear up the problem. What I am proposing is that, on the one hand, we would have two types of schema : ideational and interpersonal; then, on the other hand, there would be two interacting sets of procedural principles (interpersonal and textual) essentially pragmatic in nature. Those principles, as it was suggested in the "young-giant" example, work on the basis of appropriate schemata engaged upon in the discourse process.

It is a difficult task to decide on the number and quality of procedural principles at work in discourse, but I would suggest a good point of departure would be a study of the maxims of the textual and interpersonal rhetoric in the way proposed by Leech (1983). It might also be interesting to explore how these procedures are associated with the different types of schematic knowledge.

Leech, on a survey of the interpersonal rhetoric, states the existence of two main principles, the *Cooperative Principle* and the *Politeness Principle*, with a number of maxims each. The maxims of the Cooperative principle are those studied by Grice:

Quantity : Make your contribution as informative as possible. Do not be more informative than required.

Quality : Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner : Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Be brief, orderly and polite.

The maxims of the Politeness Principle would include a number of variables such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy, phatic communion and others. An apparent breach of one of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle may involve the enforcing of a maxim from the Politeness Principle (or of any other pragmatic principle, like Irony). If I say *John's a fine friend* and it is a downright lie I may seem to be flouting the maxim of quality, but at the same time the hearer of the message will probably take it to be an ironical remark. Another typical example of the flouting of maxims of the Cooperative Principle can be illustrated by the following exchange :

A : Let's go to the movies

B : I have an examination in the morning

The apparent irrelevance of *B* 's remark is considered to be a breach of the maxim of relation, but it gives way to politeness (avoiding an overt refusal) by means of an excuse. Incidentally, the excuse is based on a piece of background knowledge shared by both interlocutors : when someone has an examination the next day he is likely to want to study and may not have enough spare time for other activities. In the present case the tact maxim is enforced.

From all the above examples, it might be suggested that the maxims of the Cooperative Principle will usually work in relation to ideational schemata, while the maxims of the Politeness Principle , the Irony Principle and the Interest Principle, are more liable to engage on interpersonal schemata. For example, the maxim of modesty ("minimize self-praise; maximize self-dispraise") controls the expression *How stupid of me!* . It is based on the knowledge that attributing a mistake to oneself instead of blaming someone else is part of the conventions which regulate polite social contact. That is interpersonal knowledge.

Lastly, the principles governing a textual rhetoric would instantiate any of the two types of schematic knowledge. Here we are concerned with principles which are related to efficiency and effectiveness in expression. Let us take those stated by Slobin (1975) :

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1- Be clear (*Clarity Principle*)
2- Be processible (*Processibility Principle*)
3- Be quick and easy (*Economy Principle*)
4- Be expressive (*Expressivity Principle*)

In broad outline, the first principle is concerned with transparency and avoidance of ambiguity; the second one, with the ordering of the parts of the message; the third one is related to the amount of time and effort involved in encoding and decoding (thus dealing with pronominalization, substitution, and ellipsis); the last one involves effectiveness in expression. Among these principles all relevant aspects of the textual component of a systemic grammar, such as thematization and information (processibility) and cohesion (economy), are adequately dealt with.

It will be apparent from the foregoing discussion that a sound theory of discourse will greatly benefit from a thorough consideration of the wide range of pragmatic principles at work in the speech event. A better understanding of the way these principles work is to be gained if they are studied in connection to the vast number of world knowledge assumptions constantly made by language users. It has been my desire today to draw attention to the importance of a study carried out along such lines.

NOTES

1   The definite article *the* is, of course, a linguistic indicator that speaker *B* is referring to a certain lock. It acts as a convenient (pragmatic) device to point to a portion of our common-sense knowledge that doors (may) have locks. For a discussion of the definite article as a linguistic indicator of frame elements, see Shanon (1981).

2   The existence in communication of both dynamic and static factors of this kind has been implicitly recognized by other authors as well (see Goffman, 1974; Levinson, 1978).

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