

Chapter Seven: Pragmatics

7.1. Introduction: Use and Context

1. Language Use. As a theory of English language meaning and inference, formal logic is an idealization on a par with the frictionless plane or extension-less point mass of basic physics. And as with those cases, it's useful despite its idealization because it gives the right results in a wide variety of cases. Yet occasionally formal logic yields counterintuitive verdicts which can leave us wondering whether errors lurk within our logical theory. Pragmatics is useful in such cases, because it helps to address the problems and peculiarities of logic – though, as we'll see, pragmatics is informative in many other ways as well.

We define “pragmatics” as follows.

Pragmatics: the study of language **use** in particular **contexts**.

Now, the rules for ‘using’ a sentence such as “It’s raining” look simple enough: we say the sentence in contexts where the sentence is true, and don’t say it when it’s false. If language use is just a matter of truth and falsehood, then pragmatics would just boil down to semantics – in which case there’s no call for a further study of ‘use’ in ‘context’.

But that picture of language use is naive. Simple examples illustrate that even when the semantics of a sentence (its truth and meaning) are settled, we haven’t settled how the sentence is **used** in particular contexts.

Consider the following case, where the same sentence – meaning the same thing throughout – is nonetheless **used** in different ways in different contexts.¹

Situation 1: My car is in a No Parking zone, and a police officer approaches, ticket book drawn. I tell him: “My car has a flat tire”.

¹ Borrowing an example from (Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish 1984: XX)

Situation 2: I enter a tire store and tell the person at the counter: “My car has a flat tire”.

The sentence “My car has a flat tire” is **true in both cases**; and all the words in the sentence, and the sentence as a whole, **mean the same thing in both cases**. In terms of semantics – truth and meaning – the sentence is therefore the same in both cases. Still, the sentence is **used** to do different things in the two situations: to **excuse my behavior** (being parked in a ‘No Parking’ zone) in one case, to **request help** in the other.

2. Context and Unspoken Messages. These different ‘uses’ of a sentence involve **communicating unspoken messages**. I’m reporting my flat tire in both scenarios. But in each case I’m also communicating some **second** unspoken message as well – “It’s not my fault I’m in a No Parking zone,” or “I would like you to fix the tire”

And impressively, in each case my audience recognizes the second unspoken message. Since the spoken words are the same in both situations, there’s nothing in the words alone that tips off the listener to the further message. If the meaning and form of the spoken sentence were all the audience had to go on, it would be mysterious how they extracted different unspoken messages from them – and the correct message, in each context.

Thus we propose first that the **context of utterance** makes a difference as to which unspoken message gets sent –for that’s what varied from one case to the next.

And seeing how we successfully send unspoken messages, by relying on the particular context of utterance, highlights how formal logic and pragmatics are pulling in opposite directions. For in formal logic we’ve tried, as much as possible, to flush out everything unspoken, and state it explicitly. And that’s no coincidence: by demanding everything be stated in as many words, and nothing be left unsaid, formal logic succeeds in keeping us honest in argumentation, and exposing any assumptions our reasoning may rely on.

For instance, the following little argument would fall into standard form like so.

Rex has a mind, since every person has a mind.

1. Every person has a mind.

Rex has a mind.

And our test of validity would point out that, natural as this inference may seem, the conclusion doesn't strictly follow: in a situation where every person has a mind but Rex isn't a person, it could be false that Rex has a mind. The conclusion will follow only if we add a further premise.

1. Every person has a mind.

[2. Rex is a person]

Rex has a mind.

Some might judge this overly picky, insisting that it was obvious in the original argument that Rex was taken to be a person. But while that may be true, we at least credit logic with keeping us honest, by pointing out even the most trivial-seeming claims needed to make a certain argument.

An even more trivial example comes in the following two sentences.

Trixie studied for the Logic exam, and she passed it.

In the context of this, the word "she" clearly refers to Trixie, and "it" clearly refers to the Logic exam. But recall when making a translation key we sought to banish even the innocent reliance on context, by replacing each pronoun (and pro-verb) with the earlier name or phrase it substitutes for. Hence we wouldn't make the following translation key when translating this sentence.

☠ Bad Translation Key ☠

P: Trixie studied for the Logic exam

Q: She passed it

Instead we banish pronouns (and pro-verbs), so that each entry in the translation key can be understood on its own – that is, without relying on outside context.

Proper Translation Key

P: Trixie studied for the Logic exam

Q: Trixie passed the Logic exam

But recall: the reason we use pronouns and pro-verbs in ordinary conversation is to avoid being overly repetitive and long-winded. If all language use had to meet such standards, communication would become a dreary chore.

Here again case is analogous to other formal disciplines like mathematics and physics: intolerable to use for day to day – and hour-to-hour – use; but useful for its own special purposes.

Pragmatics studies precisely the aspects of ordinary language that formal logic seeks to banish: the use of context to avoid explicitly stating everything that's intended.