

# Chapter Two: Pragmatics

## 2.1. Pragmatics: Basic Concepts

**1. Language Use.** We begin by setting out a working definition of “pragmatics”.

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

Such talk of ‘use’ might seem like nothing new after our study of semantics. For the rules for ‘using’ a sentence such as “It’s raining” look simple enough: we say it when it’s raining, and not otherwise. That is: we say the sentence in those 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 “the study of language use in particular contexts” is just semantics, and there is no call for a second discipline, pragmatics.

But that picture of language use is too simple. In fact simple examples illustrate that even when the semantics of a sentence (its truth and meaning) are settled, we haven’t thereby settled how the sentence is *used* in a particular context.

Consider the following example, where the same sentence – *meaning* the same thing throughout – is nonetheless *used* in different ways (in different contexts).<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> From (Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish 19xx: XX)

Note that the sentence “My car has a flat tire” is equally **true** in both cases; and all the words in the sentence (and hence the sentence as a whole) **mean** the same thing in both cases. So in terms of semantics – truth and meaning – the sentence is the same in both cases. Still I’m **using** the sentence to do different things in the two situations: to excuse myself in one case, to request help in the other. This feature of use, above and beyond the semantic issues of truth and meaning, is one of the core phenomena studied by pragmatics.

A way of understanding talk about ‘using’ a sentence is to think of it in terms of **communicating unspoken messages**. In the previous example I’m reporting my flat tire in both scenarios. But in each case I’m also communicating some *second* 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 immediately understands that I’m communicating such a second, unspoken message, and recognizes *which* unspoken message that is. Since the spoken words are the same in both situations, there is nothing in the words alone that tips off the listener about the further, unspoken message. How do they achieve this impressive feat?

We propose, first, that the **context of utterance** makes a difference as to which unspoken message gets sent. (That’s what changed from one case to the next).

And we propose, second, that language users share certain implicit (unspoken) **conversational rules** concerning how to communicate unspoken messages. If everyone follows the same communicative rules, and trusts everyone else to follow them, then the speaker can count on the listeners to figure out what, in that context, was left unspoken.

**3. Conversations.** To spell out these points in fuller detail, we introduce some very basic pragmatic notions that we will build off of. The most basic is the **Conversation**.

**A conversation is any episode of language use to communicate information from one person to some other(s).**

Notice that a conversation doesn't have to be an even exchange: a logic lecture is an extended (and very one-sided) conversation, because it involves at least two participants and language is being used to communicate information. So "conversation," in the special sense intended here, includes what we'd ordinarily call a conversation, but much more as well – any episode of linguistic communication involving (at least) two parties.<sup>2</sup>

As conversations proceed, and we move from one conversation to the next, we accumulate information – most obviously, all the sentences heard (and accepted). For instance, there are things I can now count on you to know about the definition of the word "pragmatics" which I couldn't have expected you to know before reading this section. The definition of "pragmatics" is now in the background of accepted information held in common, which I can count on the reader to know in our conversation.

We call this set of accepted background sentences the **Conversational Background**.

**The conversational background is the set of sentences accepted by all the participants in a conversation.**

We might consider defining the Conversational Background instead as the set of sentences *believed* by all the participants in a conversation. But that

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<sup>2</sup> So talking to yourself doesn't count as a conversation.

definition would be too narrow, since we sometimes share a common assumption, for the sake of discussion, that in fact we don't all *believe*. For example, an atheist could discuss the nature of God with someone who believes in God (saying things like "But then why does God allow evil in the world?"), and speaking throughout the conversation as if God exists, even though she didn't believe in God. She would then be 'entertaining' the claim "God exists" – temporarily adopting this claim for the sake of argument – without *believing* it.

The same sort of temporary assumption occurs in discussion of fictional people and events. In a discussion of Sherlock Holmes' behavior and attitudes, we assume (for the duration of the discussion) that Sherlock Holmes exists, has the characteristics reported in the stories by A.C. Doyle, and so on; still, we don't *believe* these claims. On the other hand, if we disagree whether Jupiter is further from Earth than Saturn, we are likewise accepting that Jupiter and Saturn exist – and here we *really do* believe the claim. In both sorts of cases the claim is in the conversational background – assumptions about the existence of God or Sherlock Holmes only temporarily, the assumption that Jupiter and Saturn exist as one we remain committed to.

We will use the general word "acceptance" to cover both kinds of conversational commitment to a sentence – temporary, hypothetical commitment to the existence of Sherlock Holmes, and enduring commitment to the existence of Saturn and Jupiter. And we then define the Conversational Background in terms of such acceptance.