

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 extensionless point mass of basic physics. And as with those cases, formal logic is still useful in spite of its idealization because it gives the right results in a wide variety of case. But occasionally it yields counterintuitive verdicts that can leave us thinking something has gone wrong – and so wondering whether errors lurk within our theory of formal logic. Pragmatics is useful to a study of logic because it helps to address the problems and peculiarities of logic – though, as we’ll see, pragmatics is instructive 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 ‘the study of language use in particular contexts’ is just semantics – in which case there’s no call for a further discipline, pragmatics.

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 thereby settled how the sentence is **used** in a particular context.

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. 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 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, 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.

Another example of the different uses we make of the same sentences comes from arguments themselves. (a) For one and the same argument can be used in different ways, depending on the context. Of course an argument can be used to convince an audience of the argument’s conclusion. And for this purpose it’s important that the conclusion follow from the premises, and that the premise are true.

(b) But if the premises form a scientific theory, then the conclusion following validly from that theory will be some prediction the theory makes about the world. In that case we might first determine the truth of the conclusion (through experiment and measurement) in order to determine the truth of the theory. Specifically: if the theory logically entails a false prediction, then one or more sentences in the theory must be false. In that case we’re using the truth or falsehood of the conclusion to assess the truth or falsehood of the premises.

(c) And a very obvious third use of an argument is as an object of study in a logic textbook. In that case we aren’t especially concerned with whether a premise or conclusion is actually true, just in the formal relations between sentences, such as entailment or consistency, as objects of study in themselves.

So while we originally defined argument in terms of its ability to convince an audience of its conclusion, we see that even that’s an idealization. From one context to the next – from political debate, to scientific test, to logic course – one and the same argument can be used in a variety of ways.

2. Context. The (a) and (b) uses of arguments illustrate that what’s treated as **settled** can vary from one context to the next: whether the premises count

as settled fact is important for convincing an audience of the conclusion, whereas it's conclusion as settled fact that's important for testing a theory.

Also: while we said that the other factor in a convincing argument is that **the premises are true**, that too is an idealization. For the truth of those sentence won't convince the audience unless it's recognized – **accepted as true** – by that audience. And what is taken as uncontroversial can vary, as the (a) and (b) examples already illustrate. What's uncontroversial to a roomful of physicists (or of potters or priests) won't be uncontroversial to an audience drawn from the general public.²

[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. The Common Ground. 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 **discussion**: any episode of language use to communicate information from one person to some other(s).

² We finessed this point in 1.7 by inquiring into conditions for an "ideally convincing" argument.

Notice that a discussion doesn't have to be an even exchange: a logic lecture is an extended (and very one-sided) discussion, because it involves at least two participants and language is being used to communicate information. So "discussion," in the special sense intended here, includes what we'd ordinarily call a discussion, but much more as well – any episode of linguistic communication involving (at least) two parties.³

As discussions proceed, and we move from one discussion 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 **Common Ground**.

The Common Ground is the set of sentences accepted by all the participants in a discussion.

We might consider defining the Common Ground instead as the set of sentences **believed** by all the participants in a discussion. But that 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 agnostic could discuss the nature of God with someone who believes in God (saying things like "But then why does God allow suffering 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,

³ So talking to yourself doesn't count as a discussion.

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 common ground – 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 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 Common Ground in terms of such acceptance.