1

The scope of pragmatics

The purpose of this Chapter is to provide some indication of the scope of linguistic pragmatics. First, the historical origin of the term **pragmatics** will be briefly summarized, in order to indicate some usages of the term that are divergent from the usage in this book. Secondly, we will review some definitions of the field, which, while being less than fully satisfactory, will at least serve to indicate the rough scope of linguistic pragmatics. Thirdly, some reasons for the current interest in the field will be explained, while a final section illustrates some basic kinds of pragmatic phenomena. In passing, some analytical notions that are useful background will be introduced.

1.1 The origin and historical vagaries of the term pragmatics

The modern usage of the term **pragmatics** is attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris (1938), who was concerned to outline (after Locke and Peirce)[1] the general shape of a science of signs, or **semiotics** (or **semiotic** as Morris preferred). Within semiotics, Morris distinguished three distinct branches of inquiry: **syntactics** (or **syntax**), being the study of "the formal relation of signs to one another", **semantics**, the study of "the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable" (their designata), and **pragmatics**, the study of "the relation of signs to interpreters" (1938: 6). Within each branch of semiotics, one could make the distinction between **pure** studies, concerned with the

[1] Apart from this connection, there is only the slightest historical relation between pragmatics and the philosophical doctrines of **pragmatism** (see Morris, 1938 (1971: 43); Lyons, 1977a: 119). There have been recent attempts, however, to recast Morris's trichotomy in a Peircean (or pragmatist) mould, which are not covered in this book: see Silverstein, 1976; Bean, 1978.

1

elaboration of the relevant metalanguage, and **descriptive** studies which applied the metalanguage to the description of specific signs and their usages (1938 (1971: 24)).

As instances of usage governed by **pragmatical rule**, Morris noted that "interjections such as *Oh!*, commands such as *Come here!*, ... expressions such as *Good morning!* and various rhetorical and poetical devices, occur only under certain definite conditions in the users of the language" (1938 (1971: 48)). Such matters would still today be given a treatment within linguistic pragmatics. But Morris went on to expand the scope of pragmatics in accord with his particular behaviouristic theory of semiotics (Black, 1947): "It is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs" (1938: 108). Such a scope is very much wider than the work that currently goes on under the rubric of linguistic pragmatics, for it would include what is now known as psycholinguistics, socio-linguistics, neurolinguistics and much besides.

Since Morris's introduction of the trichotomy syntax, semantics and pragmatics, the latter term has come to be used in two very distinct ways. On the one hand, the very broad use intended by Morris has been retained, and this explains the usage of the term *pragmatics* in the titles of books that deal, for example, with matters as diverse as the psychopathology of communication (in the manner of G. Bateson and R. D. Laing – see Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) and the evolution of symbol systems (see Cherry, 1974). Even here though, there has been a tendency to use *pragmatics* exclusively as a division of *linguistic* semiotics, rather than as pertaining to sign systems in general. This broad usage of the term, covering socio-linguistics, psycholinguistics and more, is still the one generally used on the Continent (see e.g. the collection in Wunderlich, 1972, and issues of the *Journal of Pragmatics*).

On the other hand, and especially within analytical philosophy, the term *pragmatics* was subject to a successive narrowing of scope. Here the philosopher and logician Carnap was particularly influential. After an initial Morrisian usage (Carnap, 1938: 2), he adopted the following version of the trichotomy:

> 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 [the investigation] 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, finally, if we abstract from the designata also
> and analyze only the relations between the expressions, we are
> in (logical) syntax.

Unfortunately Carnap's usage of the term *pragmatics* was confused
by his adoption of Morris's further distinction between pure and
descriptive studies, and he came to equate pragmatics with descriptive
semiotics in general, and thus with the study of natural (as opposed
to logical) languages (Carnap, 1959: 13; see the useful clarification
in Lieb, 1971). But Carnap was not even consistent here: he also held
(Carnap, 1956) that there was room for a **pure pragmatics** which
would be concerned with concepts like *belief*, *utterance*, and *intension*
and their logical inter-relation. This latter usage, now more or less
defunct, explains the use of the term in, for example, the title of a
book by Martin (1959). Thus at least four quite different senses of
the term can be found in Carnap's works, but it was the definition
quoted above that was finally influential.

   Incidentally, already in Morris's and Carnap's usages there can be
found a systematic three-way ambiguity: the term *pragmatics* was
applied not only to branches of inquiry (as in the contrast between
pragmatics and semantics), but also to features of the object language
(or language under investigation), so that one could talk of, say, the
pragmatic particle *Oh!* in English, and to features of the metalanguage
(or technical description), so that one could talk of, say, a pragmatic,
versus a semantic, description of the particle *Oh!*. Such an ambiguity
merely seems to parallel the way in which the sister terms *semantics*
and *syntax* are used, and to introduce little confusion (but cf.
Sayward, 1974).

   The idea that pragmatics was the study of aspects of language that
required reference to the users of the language then led to a very
natural, further restriction of the term in analytical philosophy. For
there is one aspect of natural languages that indubitably requires such
reference, namely the study of **deictic** or **indexical** words like the
pronouns *I* and *you* (see Chapter 2). The philosophical, and especially
logical, interest in these terms is simply that they account for the
potential failure of generally valid schemes of reasoning. For example,
''I am Greta Garbo, Greta Garbo is a woman, therefore I am a

3

The scope of pragmatics

woman", is only necessarily true if in addition to the first two premises being true, the speaker of the conclusion is the same speaker as the speaker of the first premise. Bar-Hillel (1954) therefore took the view that pragmatics is the study of languages, both natural and artificial, that contain indexical or deictic terms, and this usage was explicitly adopted by Kalish (1967), and most influentially by Montague (1968). Such a usage has little to offer linguists, since all natural languages have deictic terms, and it would follow, as Gazdar (1979a: 2) points out, that natural languages would have no semantics but only a syntax and a pragmatics. If the trichotomy is to do some work within linguistics, some less restricted scope for pragmatics must be found.

In fact, in the late 1960s, an implicit version of Carnap's definition – investigations requiring reference to the users of a language – was adopted within linguistics, and specifically within the movement known as **generative semantics**. The history of that movement awaits a historian of ideas (but see Newmeyer, 1980), but its association with pragmatics can be explained by the resurgence of the interest in meaning which the movement represented. Such an interest inevitably involves pragmatics, as we shall see. Moreover this interest in meaning in a wide sense proved to be one of the best directions from which generative semantics could assail Chomsky's (1965) **standard theory**. At the same time, there was a keen interest shown by linguists in philosophers' attempts to grapple with problems of meaning, sometimes from the point of view of the 'users of the language'. For a period, at least, linguists and philosophers seemed to be on a common path, and this commonality of interest crystallized many of the issues with which this book is concerned. During this period, the scope of pragmatics was implicitly restricted. Carnap's 'investigations making reference to users of the language' is at once too narrow and too broad for linguistic interests. It is too broad because it admits studies as non-linguistic as Freud's investigations of 'slips of the tongue' or Jung's studies of word associations. So studies in linguistic pragmatics need to be restricted to investigations that have at least potential linguistic implications. On the other hand, Carnap's definition is too narrow in that, on a simple inter-pretation, it excludes parallel phenomena.[2] For example, just as the

[2] On another interpretation, all pragmatic parameters refer to users of the language, if only because such parameters must, in order to be relevant, be known or believed by participants.

4

interpretation of the words *I* and *you* relies on the identification of particular participants (or 'users') and their role in the speech event, so the words *here* and *now* rely for their interpretation on the place and time of the speech event. Therefore Carnap's definition might be amended to something like: 'those linguistic investigations that make necessary reference to aspects of the context', where the term **context** is understood to cover the identities of participants, the temporal and spatial parameters of the speech event, and (as we shall see) the beliefs, knowledge and intentions of the participants in that speech event, and no doubt much besides.

To summarize, a number of distinct usages of the term *pragmatics* have sprung from Morris's original division of semiotics: the study of the huge range of psychological and sociological phenomena involved in sign systems in general or in language in particular (the Continental sense of the term); or the study of certain abstract concepts that make reference to agents (one of Carnap's senses); or the study of indexicals or deictic terms (Montague's sense); or finally the recent usage within Anglo-American linguistics and philosophy. This book is concerned exclusively with the last sense of the term, and it is to an explication of this particular usage that we should now turn.

1.2 Defining pragmatics

The relatively restricted sense of the term *pragmatics* in Anglo-American philosophy and linguistics, and correspondingly in this book, deserves some attempt at definition. Such a definition is, however, by no means easy to provide, and we shall play with a number of possibilities each of which will do little more than sketch a range of possible scopes for the field. This diversity of possible definitions and lack of clear boundaries may be disconcerting, but it is by no means unusual: since academic fields are congeries of preferred methods, implicit assumptions, and focal problems or subject matters, attempts to define them are rarely wholly satisfactory. And indeed, in one sense there is no problem of definition at all: just as, traditionally, syntax is taken to be the study of the combinatorial properties of words and their parts, and semantics to be the study of meaning, so pragmatics is the study of language usage. Such a definition is just as good (and bad) as the parallel definitions of the sister terms, but it will hardly suffice to indicate what the practioners

The scope of pragmatics

of pragmatics actually do; to find that out, as in any discipline, one must go and take a look.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for attempting at least some indication of the scope of pragmatics. In the first place, it is simply a sufficiently unfamiliar term. In the second place, it is not so easy to just 'go and take a look' at what workers in pragmatics do: there are (at the time of writing) no available textbooks, only one specialist journal (*Journal of Pragmatics*) and that covering the broader Continental usage of the term, only a handful of monographs and a few collections of papers. Nevertheless, there is much work scattered throughout the various journals of linguistics and philosophy. Thirdly, some authors seem to suggest that there is no coherent field at all; thus Lyons (1977a: 117) states that "the applicability [of the distinction between syntax, semantics and pragmatics] to the description of natural languages, in contrast to the description or construction of logical calculi, is, to say the least, uncertain", while Searle, Kiefer & Bierwisch (1980: viii) suggest that "*Pragmatics* is one of those words (*societal* and *cognitive* are others) that give the impression that something quite specific and technical is being talked about when often in fact it has no clear meaning." The pragmaticist is thus challenged to show that, at least within the linguistic and philosophical tradition that is the concern of this book, the term does have clear application.

Let us therefore consider a set of possible definitions of pragmatics. We shall find that each of them has deficiencies or difficulties of a sort that would equally hinder definitions of other fields, but at least in this way, by assaults from all flanks, a good sketch of the general topography can be obtained.

Let us start with some definitions that are in fact less than satisfactory. One possible definition might go as follows: pragmatics is the study of those principles that will account for why a certain set of sentences are anomalous, or not possible utterances. That set might include:[3]

[3] We shall use the symbol ?? at the beginning of example sentences to indicate that they are (at least putatively) pragmatically anomalous, reserving * for sentences that are syntactically ill-formed or semantically anomalous; a single initial ? indicates anomaly on at least one of these three levels, but is non-committal about the nature of the anomaly.

6

(1)   ??Come there please!
(2)   ??Aristotle was Greek, but I don't believe it
(3)   ??Fred's children are hippies, and he has no children
(4)   ??Fred's children are hippies, and he has children
(5)   ??I order you not to obey this order
(6)   ??I hereby sing
(7)   ??As everyone knows, the earth please revolves around the sun

The explanation of the anomalies exhibited by these sentences might be provided by pointing out that there are no, or at least no ordinary, contexts in which they could be appropriately used.[4] Although an approach of this sort may be quite a good way of illustrating the kind of principles that pragmatics is concerned with, it will hardly do as an explicit definition of the field – for the simple reason that the set of pragmatic (as opposed to semantic, syntactic or sociolinguistic) anomalies are presupposed, rather than explained.[5]

Another kind of definition that might be offered would be that pragmatics is the study of language from a **functional** perspective, that is, that it attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes. But such a definition, or scope, for pragmatics would fail to distinguish linguistic pragmatics from many other disciplines interested in functional approaches to language, including psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Moreover, it may be plausibly argued that to adopt a definition of this sort is to confuse the *motives* for studying pragmatics, with the *goals* or general shape of a theory (about which more later).

One quite restricted scope for pragmatics that has been proposed is that pragmatics should be concerned solely with principles of language usage, and have nothing to do with the description of linguistic structure. Or, to invoke Chomsky's distinction between **competence** and **performance**, pragmatics is concerned solely with performance principles of language use. Thus, Katz & Fodor (1963) suggested that a theory of pragmatics (or a theory of **setting**

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[4] This line of argument relies on the distinction between **use** and **mention**, or between 'ordinary' usage and metalinguistic usage, for which see Lyons, 1977a: 5ff and references therein. In the sense of this distinction, sentences like (1)–(7) can be mentioned, but they cannot easily be used.

[5] Another problem is that it is often in fact possible to imagine contexts in which the alleged anomalies are after all quite usable - the reader can try with the examples above. This problem will recur when we consider the concept of appropriateness of an utterance, discussed below.

selection as they then called it) would essentially be concerned with the disambiguation of sentences by the contexts in which they were uttered. In fact it is clear that contexts do a lot more than merely select between available semantic readings of sentences – for example, irony, understatement and the like are kinds of use that actually create new interpretations in contexts. Still, one could claim that grammar (in the broad sense inclusive of phonology, syntax and semantics) is concerned with the context-free assignment of meaning to linguistic forms, while pragmatics is concerned with the further interpretation of those forms in a context:

> [Grammars] are theories about the structure of sentence types ... Pragmatic theories, in contrast, 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 respect, a pragmatic theory is part of performance. (Katz, 1977: 19)

This position has a number of adherents (Kempson, 1975, 1977; Smith & Wilson, 1979), but it has a serious difficulty. The problem is that aspects of linguistic structure sometimes directly encode (or otherwise interact with) features of the context. It then becomes impossible to draw a neat boundary between context-independent grammar (competence) and context-dependent interpretation (performance). This problem is unwittingly illustrated by Katz's explication of this boundary: he points out that the pairs *rabbit* and *bunny*, or *dog* and *doggie* differ in that the second member of each pair is appropriately used either by or to children. Since the distinction is one relating to the appropriate users of the terms in a context, the distinction would not be part of a linguistic description of English, which would merely note that the members of each pair are synonymous. However, it is clear that the distinction is built into the language, in just the same way that in many languages degrees of respect between participants are encoded in lexis and morphology. Katz suggests that in order to ascertain whether a linguistic feature is context-dependent or context-independent, we imagine the feature occurring on an anonymous postcard (as an approximation to the empty or **null context**).[6] But if we apply this criterion we see that

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[6] Here contrast Searle (1979b: 117): "There is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences ... we understand the meaning

the implication or inference that speaker or addressee is a child is as available when *bunny* is written on an anonymous postcard as it is when said in some concrete appropriate context (Gazdar, 1979a: 3). And that of course is because the kind of appropriate speaker or addressee is encoded by the term *bunny*.

Here we come to the heart of the definitional problem: the term *pragmatics* covers both context-dependent aspects of language structure and principles of language usage and understanding that have nothing or little to do with linguistic structure. It is difficult to forge a definition that will happily cover both aspects. But this should not be taken to imply that pragmatics is a hodge-podge, concerned with quite disparate and unrelated aspects of language; rather, pragmaticists are specifically interested in the inter-relation of language structure and principles of language usage. Let us now consider some potential definitions that are more plausible candidates.

We may begin with a definition that is specifically aimed at capturing the concern of pragmatics with features of language structure. The definition might go as follows:

(8)   Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are **grammaticalized**, or encoded in the structure of a language[7]

Or, putting it another way, one could say that pragmatics is the study of just those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars. Such a definition restricts pragmatics to the study of certain aspects of linguistic structure, and stands in strong contrast to Katz's proposal, outlined above, that would restrict pragmatics to the study of grammatically irrelevant aspects of language usage. Such a scope for pragmatics would include the study of **deixis**, including honorifics and the like, and probably the study of **presupposition** and **speech acts**, i.e. much of the present book. It would exclude the study of principles of language usage that could not be shown to have repercussions on the grammar of languages, and this could be an embarrassment,

of such sentences only against a set of background assumptions about the contexts in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered."

[7] The term *grammaticalization* is used throughout this book in the broad sense covering the encoding of meaning distinctions – again in a wide sense – in the lexicon, morphology, syntax and phonology of languages.

The scope of pragmatics

because, at least at first sight, the extremely important implications called **conversational implicatures** would lie outside the purview of a pragmatic theory. On the other hand, such a scope for pragmatics has the possible advantage that it would effectively delimit the field, and exclude neighbouring fields like sociolinguistics and psycho-linguistics – in short it would bound Morris's and Carnap's definitions in a way that guaranteed linguistic relevance.

Now, any definition of pragmatics that excludes one of its presumed focal phenomena, namely conversational implicature, is unlikely to be attractive. Nevertheless, its adherents might appeal to the plausi-bility of the following general principle: any systematic principle of language usage is ultimately likely to have an impact on language structure. There is perhaps some basis for such an assumption (see e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1978: 260ff). And in fact conversational implicatures, which are inferences that arise on the basis of some general rules or maxims of conversational behaviour, can indeed be shown to have repercussions on linguistic structure (see Chapter 3 below). So the definition may in fact be much less restrictive than it appears at first sight.

Other problems concern the notions of context and gram-maticalization that the definition rests on. Arguably, though, it is a strength of this approach that it is not required to give a prior characterization of the notion of context. For, assuming that we have a clear idea of the limits of semantics, then pragmatics studies all the non-semantic features that are encoded in languages, and these features are aspects of the context. What aspects of the gross physical, social and interactional aspects of the situation of utterance are linguistically relevant is thus an empirical question, and we can study the world's languages to find out what they are. Of course, we would need to make an important distinction here between **universal pragmatics**, the general theory of what aspects of context get encoded and how, and the **language-specific pragmatics** of individual languages; for example, the pragmatics of English might have relatively little to say about social status (beyond what we need to describe the appropriate contexts for the use of *sir*, *your honour* and the like), while in contrast the pragmatics of Japanese would be greatly concerned with the grammaticalization of the relative social ranks of participants and referents.

On the other hand, the notion of grammaticalization, or linguistic

10