

1 Language, communication and pragmatics

1.1 A communication perspective

The aim of this lecture series is to provide an overview of language and the way it is studied in linguistics. A single-page diagram represents my conception of the subject and the way its elements interrelate. I begin by placing language in the context of communication as a whole. This is the typical dictionary definition: language communicates ideas (its ideational function). Other functions of language (such as its identifying and ludic functions) are discussed later.

I use a perspective found in semiotics, defined here as the study of patterned human communication in all its modes. There are five of these modes, related to the five senses (six, if we include telepathy). Humans make little use of two of these modes when communicating meaning – smell (olfactory) and taste (gustatory) – which are more important for animals (an area studied by zoosemiotics).

Communication using the visual mode (kinesics) and tactile mode (proxemics) seem more relevant to the subject, as they are often grouped together as 'body language' (non-verbal communication, NVC). Note that this is not the same as sign language in the context of the deaf, discussed below. Kinesic activity includes our everyday facial expressions and bodily postures and gestures, often thought to be universal, but in fact displaying a great deal of cultural variation and sometimes developed into elaborate systems (as in dance). Within a culture, facial movements are meaningful, with a few exceptions, as are gestures and postures. Proxemic activity includes touching behaviour and distance space, and also displays cultural variation.

NVC has important social psychological functions, and it can act as a commentary on language; but from a linguistic point of view the term 'body language' is misleading. We need to beware common metaphorical uses of the term 'language', such as when talking about music and animals. NVC lacks certain properties which are essential to language in the linguistic sense. In particular, there is limited productivity compared with the size of a

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lexicon, the generative potential of a grammar, and the ever-present creative possibilities inherent in language. And there is hardly any structural complexity compared with the duality (levels of form and meaning) found in language.

The study of language thus deals primarily with the auditory–vocal mode of communication: listening and speaking – primary, because found in all languages (only some have been written down) and children (who learn to speak before they learn to write). It is the focus of the 'speech sciences'. The representation of speech in writing provides a second focus. And the development of alternative systems of communication, as in sign, provides a third. These three dimensions comprise the subject of language, and the scientific study of language is linguistics.

There are two sides to language study: structure and use. The two dimensions complement each other, and should always be taken together (hence the arrowed line joining the two terms in the diagram). We should never study structure without considering use, otherwise artificial sentences are created; and we should never study use without considering structure, otherwise language analysis, lacking descriptive terminology, becomes vague. 'This is a table' illustrates a sentence which lacks usability. 'The house, old, ruined, stood on the hillside' illustrates a sentence whose effect cannot be satisfactorily explained without some descriptive terms. How are structure and use to be related? This is where pragmatics plays a central role.

1.2 The centrality of pragmatics

Pragmatics developed as a branch of linguistics when linguists realized that the structural levels of linguistic enquiry (phonology, grammar, semantics) were not enough to explain language use. It is the study of the choices we make when we use language – the intentions that lie behind our choices, and the effects our choices convey. The structural levels focus on the what and how of language; pragmatics focuses on the why. It provides an explanatory perspective for language use.

This is a radical departure from traditional practice in language teaching, often summarized by the phrase 'feature spotting'. Examination questions might ask students to find examples of passive constructions in a paragraph, or alliteration in a poem. Today, more insightful questions are found: students are asked to discuss why such features are there. What effects did the speaker or writer intend? What would be conveyed if alternative features were used?

As an example of this new perspective, consider the question 'How old are you?' The description of this sentence in terms of phonology, grammar and semantics is clear enough. Pragmatics considers the situations in which we would be likely to use such a sentence. It transpires that its spoken uses involve a cautionary agenda, such as in official enquiry and medical investigation, or raise sensitive issues of politeness.

Any linguistic feature can and should be explored in this way. Examples from grammar are the choice of second-person pronouns (such as *tu* versus *vous*) and the choice between active and passive. An example from phonology is the use of tone of voice, such as conspiratorial whisper. An example from vocabulary is the choice between different terms of address.

The full range of linguistic features that can express pragmatic force is classified in the diagram under the heading of Structure.