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COLLEGE OF BASIC EDUCATION  
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MA COURSE IN LINGUISTICS

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# PRAGMATICS

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## **AN OVERVIEW OF PRAGMATICS**

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- **Definitions and Background**

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of **meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader).**

- It has, consequently, more to do with the analysis of **what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves.**

*Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning.*

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This type of study necessarily involves the **interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said**. It requires a consideration of how speakers organize what they want to say in accordance with who they're talking to, where, when, and under what circumstances.

*Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning.*

*Linguistic context: co text = a set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. 'bank'.*

*Physical context: e.g, the word 'bank' on a building is understood as a financial institution.*

This approach also necessarily explores how **listeners can make inferences about what is said in order to arrive at an interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning.** This type of study explores how a great deal of **what is unsaid** is recognized as part of what is communicated. We might say that it is the **investigation of invisible meaning.**

*Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said.*

This perspective then raises the question of what determines the choice between the said and the unsaid. The basic answer is tied to the **notion of distance**. **Closeness, whether it is physical, social, or conceptual, implies shared experience**. On the assumption of how close or distant the listener is, speakers determine how much needs to be said.

*Pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance.*

The following are the four areas that pragmatics is concerned with:

- speaker meaning (intension),
- context,
- invisible meaning and
- inference.

There are two main reasons why pragmatics currently accommodates such varied and diverse definitions.

**The first** is simply that it is itself a varied and diverse field of study, which covers many aspects of the relationship between meaning and context.

There is something to be said in favor of all the definitions suggested above, as well as others that you may come across, even if none of them in isolation tells the whole story.

**The second** reason for all the different definitions is that the various models, theories and schools of thought that make up pragmatics each have different ideas about what are the appropriate terms of the discussion.



e.g: (1) Towards the end, with the light, it was tough.

A very natural first reaction to this example might well be that: it is clearly **taken out of context**, and without some **background information** it is impossible to work out what is being communicated here. This reaction illustrates our awareness that **meaning is closely bound up with context**.

If you are used to analyzing examples in terms of **their grammatical structure** you might spot that this is **a complete and grammatical sentence**. So the problem with interpretation can't be that the example is in some way incomplete in itself or is just a fragment. The sentence may be complete, but it **doesn't contain sufficient information within itself to tell us what is being communicated**. For many aspects of what is being communicated we need some further particulars of the context in which this example was spoken.

however, there are some things that we do know about the meaning of this example; we are not totally at a loss as to what we can understand from it. For instance, we know that: 1) **someone is describing an event or situation that took place at some point in the past.** 2) We can also **form some general ideas about what types of things might be described by words such as ‘end’, ‘light’ and ‘tough’**, although even these ideas will have to remain both vague and tentative.

We know these things simply because we are **speakers of the English language**. That is, **our knowledge is based on what we have learnt, either as little children or more recently, about the vocabulary and the grammar of the language**. One way of putting this is to say that this knowledge is part of our knowledge of the Semantics of English.

Even if we are fully competent in the English language, there are many questions about example (1) that we simply can't answer. We can't say, for instance, **when the situation in question occurred**, what particular light is mentioned, or **what the pronoun 'it' refers to**. Furthermore, without knowing what 'it' refers to we can't be sure what exact properties are being described by the adjective 'tough'. There are many different ways in which we use '**tough**' in our everyday language.

*A pair of trousers, a math problem, a decision and a piece of beef can all be described as 'tough'. All these aspects of meaning, and more besides, can only be settled once we learn some more about the context in which the example was spoken.*

In fact, example (1) is a quotation from an **interview** with the **tennis player Roger Federer on 6 July 2008**. He had just **lost** the men's singles final **at Wimbledon** to the relative newcomer **Rafael Nadal** in a hard-fought match that had **continued into the evening** when it **was almost dark**. This amount of information, which would of course have been readily available to the original audience of Federer's remark, immediately fills in many of the blanks in our understanding of what was being communicated in example (1)

We now know, for example, that the past tense verb ‘was’ relates to an **event that occurred just a little time before Federer was speaking**, that ‘the light’ referred to was the ambient daylight in the **late evening** on a **July day in south-west London**, that the pronoun ‘it’ refers to a particular **tennis match**, or perhaps to **Federer’s experience of playing in that match**, and that ‘**tough**’ is being used in the sense of ‘**difficult or arduous**’ rather than ‘**stiff and resistant**’.



## The Relationship between Pragmatics, Syntax and Semantics

One traditional distinction in language analysis contrasts pragmatics with syntax and semantics. **Syntax** is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms, how they are arranged in sequence, and which sequences are well-formed. This type of study generally takes place without considering any world of reference or any user of the forms.

**Semantics** is the study of **the relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world**; that is, how words literally connect to things. Semantic analysis also attempts to establish the relationships between verbal descriptions and states of affairs in the world as accurate (true) or not, regardless of who produces that description.

**Pragmatics** is the study of the relationships between **linguistic forms and the users of those forms**. In this three-part distinction, only pragmatics allows humans into the analysis. The advantage of studying language via pragmatics is that one can **talk about people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (for example, requests) that they are performing when they speak**.

The big disadvantage is that all these very human concepts are extremely difficult to analyze in a consistent and objective way.

Two friends having a conversation may imply some things and infer some others without providing any clear linguistic evidence that we can point to as the **explicit** source of 'the meaning' of what was communicated. Example [i] is just such a problematic case. I heard the speakers, I knew what they said, but I had no idea what was communicated.

- [i] Her: So—did you?
- Him: Hey—who wouldn't?

Thus, pragmatics is appealing because it's about how people make sense of each other linguistically, but it can be a frustrating area of study because it requires us to make sense of people and what they have in mind.

- **Regularity**

Luckily, people tend **to behave in fairly regular ways** when it comes to **using language**. Some of that regularity derives from the fact **that people are members of social groups and follow general patterns of behavior expected within the group**. Within a familiar social group, we normally find it easy to be **polite** and say **appropriate things**. In a new, unfamiliar social setting, we are often unsure about what to say and worry that we might say the wrong thing.

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**Experience:**

When I first lived in Saudi Arabia, I tended to answer questions in Arabic about **my health** (the equivalent of '**How are you?**') with the equivalent of my familiar routine responses of 'Okay' or 'Fine'. However, I eventually noticed that when I asked a similar question, people generally answered with a phrase that had the literal meaning of '**Praise to God**'. I soon learned to use the new expression, wanting to be **pragmatically appropriate in that context**.

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My **first** type of answer **wasn't 'wrong'** (my vocabulary and pronunciation weren't inaccurate), but it **did convey the meaning** that I was a social outsider who answered in an unexpected way.

In other words, **more was being communicated than was being said**. Initially I did not know that: **I had learned some linguistic forms in the language without learning the pragmatics of how those forms are used in a regular pattern by social insiders**.



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Another source of regularity in language use derives from the fact that **most people within a linguistic community have similar basic experiences of the world and share a lot of non-linguistic knowledge.** Let's say that, in the middle of a conversation, I mention the information in [2].

**[2] I found an old bicycle lying on the ground. The chain was rusted, and the tires were flat.**

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You are unlikely to ask why a chain and some tires were suddenly being mentioned. I can normally assume that you will make the inference that if X is a bicycle, then X has a chain and tires (and many other regular parts). Because of this type of assumption, it would be pragmatically odd for me to have expressed [2] as [3].

**[3] I found an old bicycle. A bicycle has a chain. The chain was rusted. A bicycle also has tires. The tires were flat.**

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You would perhaps think that **more was being communicated than was being said** and that you were being **treated as someone with no basic knowledge** (i.e. as stupid). Once again, nothing in the use of the linguistic forms is inaccurate, but getting the pragmatics wrong might be offensive.

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The types of regularities just described are extremely simple examples of language in use which are largely ignored by most linguistic analyses. To understand why it has become the province of pragmatics to investigate these, and many other, aspects of ordinary language in use, we need to take a brief historical look at how things got to be the way they are.