Chapter 8
Understanding Language in Context:
Key Concepts in Pragmatics

Anna Krulatz
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the key concepts in the study of pragmatics, including pragmatic competence, different types of meaning (abstract meaning, contextual meaning, and force of an utterance), the cooperative principle and four conversational maxims, as well as politeness and the concept of face (positive and negative). The chapter gives some examples of cross-cultural differences in pragmatic norms to justify the importance of teaching pragmatics in a language classroom, touching briefly on the development of pragmatic skills in a second or foreign language. It then explores different approaches to pragmatics instruction, including raising awareness about pragmatic norms in the target language through deductive and inductive tasks, presenting grammatical structures jointly with their pragmatic functions, and integrating pragmatics with content-based instruction.

WHAT IS PRAGMATICS?

Successful communication requires knowledge of not only the lexicon and the rules of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, but also the sociocultural rules (also referred to as pragmatic rules), which help interlocutors decide how to interpret what is being said as well as determine what is and is not appropriate in a given situation. Whereas semantics is preoccupied with the conventional meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, the study of pragmatics is primarily concerned with how speakers encode and how listeners decode the intended meaning of utterances depending on the situation in which they occur. In other words, pragmatics is preoccupied with the relationship between context and meaning. It can be defined as, “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially the choices they
make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (Crystal, 1997, p. 301).

The linguistic choices people make when interacting with each other are affected by cultural norms. Because languages and cultures differ in behavioral expectations that are considered polite or impolite, misunderstandings and clashes can arise in intercultural interactions (House, 2006). For instance, if an American refused an invitation to a dinner party in Mexico by stating the precise reason why they could not attend rather than promising they would try to make it, which is a typical way to refuse invitations in Mexico, their Mexican friend would likely feel offended and upset (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 79). Cultural conventions underpin pragmatic choices people make when speaking and interpreting messages, and conversely, “linguistic choices in realizing discourse may be taken to reflect deeper differences in cultural preferences and expectation patterns” (House, 2006, p. 264). The study of pragmatics encompasses the area of linguistic enquiry that investigates the interface of language and culture, i.e., language use in a social context. It examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted in a given situation, and how speakers, using their knowledge of social and cultural norms, are able to express more, or something different from what they actually say.

**WHAT IS PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE?**

Pragmatic knowledge or ability is one of the components of communicative competence, a construct introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) in response to Chomsky’s (1965) narrow definition of linguistic competence as the speaker’s perfect, abstract, and unconscious knowledge of grammar. Hymes (1972) argued that it is problematic to view linguistic competence in isolation from sociocultural factors, and instead proposed that the knowledge of what is contextually appropriate is an integral component of a speaker’s knowledge of language. In other words, in addition to knowing how to produce grammatically correct sentences, language users also need to know “when to speak, when not, and … what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner” (Hymes, 1972, p. 277).

In second language acquisition studies, the concept of communicative competence was embraced and further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), who understood it as the underlying knowledge required for communication, and who distinguished its four components: grammatical, discourse, strategic, and pragmatic competence (sometimes referred to as sociolinguistic competence), arguing that all four are crucial for successful communication. Grammatical competence allows language users to decode and encode literal meaning of utterances (see abstract meaning below), and it is comprised of the knowledge of the lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Discourse competence is responsible for creating cohesion and coherence in longer stretches of oral or written text, i.e., it supplements grammatical competence beyond the level of a sentence. Strategic competence enables speakers and listeners to overcome difficulties that arise in communication through both linguistic and non-linguistic means, for example, the use of synonyms, paraphrases, gestures, and visuals to make a message clear. Finally, pragmatic competence is the knowledge of the sociocultural norms and the effect that they have on the selection of appropriate language means to convey a message. It enables speakers to consider factors such as the topic, context, and purpose of an interaction, and the status and roles of the participants.

Other models of communicative competence have been outlined as well, such as the model proposed by Bachman (1990), which situates sociolinguistic skills in a more prominent position. In Bachman’s