

Pragmatics

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Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used and of the effect of *context* on language.

What is linguistic context? Why must we consider context?

(1) Kim's got a knife.

Sentence (1) can be used to accomplish different things in different contexts:

- to make an *assertion*:
- to give a *warning*:
- to ask a *question*:

Context

What exactly are the factors which are relevant for an account of how people use language?

We distinguish 3 main types of **contextual information**:

1. **Physical context** – this encompasses what is physically present around the speakers/hearers at the time of communication. What objects are visible, where the communication is taking place, what is going on around, etc.
 - (2) a. I want **that** book. accompanied by pointing
 - b. Be **here** at 9:00 **tonight**. place/time reference

2. **Linguistic context** – what has been said before in the conversation. The “history” of things said so far.

(3) a. I can't believe you **said that!**

b. If my mom heard you talk **like that**, she'd wash all your mouths out with soap!

3. **Social context** – the social relationship of the people involved in communication.

(4) a. Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home. (this sentence is only shocking because we know you can't talk like this to the President of the U.S.)

b. I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavor to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs. (bizarre if said to a friend instead of “call me when you get home”)

Speech Acts

Whenever we use language to accomplish something we are performing a **speech act**.

→ various types of speech acts: stating, questioning, ordering, threatening, confirming, promising, requesting, advising, etc.

Sentence Types used to perform speech acts:

1. Declarative sentences

are used in **assertions**. They serve to convey information. They are characterized by having truth conditions. The “normal” kind of sentence.

- (5) a. The dog ate the bone.
b. John slept until 11 and missed his first two classes.
c. If I don't get this paper in by 5:00 I'll lose a letter grade.

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2. Interrogative sentences

are used in **questions**. They serve to elicit (bring out) information from the hearer(s).

- (6) a. Is it raining today?
b. Did you put the cat out?
c. How many times have you been to Cleveland?

3. Imperative sentences

are used in **orders** and **requests**. They are meant to affect the behavior of the hearer(s).

- (7) a. Go to the end of the line.
b. Don't even think of trying to cheat on this test.
c. Tell me what happened.

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Performative Verbs

There is a special class of verbs which are special in that

they name speech acts, and

when they are uttered they **perform** the speech acts they name.

Thus they are a direct indication of the power of language to perform various tasks.

- (8) a. I *request* that you stop that.
b. I *order* you to go to your room.
c. I *bet* you five dollars the Yankees win.
d. I *fine* you \$100 for possession of oregano.
e. I *nominate* Batman for mayor of Gotham City.
f. I *promise* to improve.
g. I *pronounce* you man and wife.

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Identifying Direct Speech Acts

How can we recognize direct speech acts when we see them?

- Sometimes the form of the sentence gives us a clue (recall discussion of *sentence types* above)
- While sometimes performative verbs will be present to help us identify the speech acts being performed, we must be careful not to be duped by them.

- (9) a. I advised you well, didn't I?
b. He warns me not to drive drunk.

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- We must have the following conditions to say that a verb is being used performatively:

1. The speech act must be **between the speaker and the hearer**.
Speech acts involving non-present 3rd parties never occur. Thus if you use a performative verb with a non-first-person subject, then you are not performing the speech act that verb names.
2. The speech act must occur **in the present**.
If you talk about a speech act you did or will do, then you are reporting that speech act, regardless if you use a performative verb to describe the speech act.

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Identifying Direct Speech Acts - The Hereby Test

- Inserting **hereby** into a sentence with a potential performative verb will give you an indication of whether that verb is being used performatively.
 - (10) a. I *hereby* request you to stop that.
 - b. I *hereby* order you to go to your room.
 - c. # I *hereby* advised you well, didn't I?
 - d. # He *hereby* warns me not to drive drunk.
- Note that this is not foolproof – sometimes verbs might be being used performatively but inserting *hereby* makes them strange anyway.
- Another problem is that sometimes performative verbs are used performatively, but to perform speech acts other than the acts they name.
 - (11) a. I promise to sue your pants off if you infringe on my patent.
 - b. I advise you to stay away from my girl/boyfriend.

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Indirect Speech Acts

Indirect speech acts are characterized by the use of language to perform a speech act without actually using a form appropriate for that speech act.

While that might sound fairly mysterious, indirect speech acts are actually extremely common – we all use them dozens of times a day.

- (12) a. Could you close the door?
Please close the door.
- b. There are wolves on the prowl tonight.
I'm warning you to watch out for wolves.
- c. I think it would be good if you sold that heap you call a car.
I advise you to sell your car.

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How To Recognize Indirect Speech Acts

- Utterances cannot be indirect speech acts if they contain performative verbs in them, since then they would be direct speech acts.
- If there is no performative verb, then look if the sentence is one of the typical forms we have outlined (**declarative, interrogative, imperative**).
These may correspond to our normal direct acts – *asserting, questioning, requesting, ordering*. But they may also be indirect.
- Imagine the context in which the utterance would be used, and try to picture what the reactions of the hearers would be.
If they respond as they would for a certain kind of speech act, you can be pretty sure that the utterance is an indirect speech act of that kind.
So if the hearers simply acknowledge the utterance, it was an assertion; if they give some sort of answer, the utterance was probably a question.

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