Pragmatics.

Pragmatics. How do we make sense of language? Is it our knowledge of the meaning (semantics) of words and their grammatical structuring (syntax) that determines utterances' meaningfulness? Obviously these are necessary, but will not allow the interpretation of 'do you the know the time?' as a request for information rather than as a yes/no question; they will not allow comprehenders to go beyond the description of the state of affairs in 'it's so hot in here' so as to interpret it as a request to turn on the air-conditioner or open the window. This is (one area) where pragmatics reigns. Pragmatics is speakers' knowledge of the principles that govern language use.

Pragmatics is commonly taken to be that field which analyzes language by reference to extralinguistic notions, such as information status (e.g., already known, in focus). It is assumed that this meaning does not contribute to the core, truth-conditional meaning of the sentence. It is heavily dependent on the current context of the speech situation, so much so, that it can even be canceled by the context (as in 'It's hot in here, but don't open the window'). Pragmatic meaning is often taken as an optional inference that the addressee is to draw based on indirect cues from the speaker. The field has been growing fast since the 1970s, rejecting (in varying degrees) the Chomskyan monopoly over linguistic analysis, since the large gap between the narrow meaning that the grammarian's semantics is able to supply and the richness of meaning which actual speakers intend and actual addressees generate in natural communicative encounters needed to be accounted for. However, it is also widely recognized that pragmatics, as it is currently defined, namely - whenever reference to nonlinguistic notions is made, is at most a perspective on language, and not a coherent field (Levinson, 1983). Recently, it has been proposed that the linguistic-extralinguistic division of labor replace the previous grammatical-pragmatic distinction, relegating some so-called pragmatic phenomena to the grammar - linguistic pragmatics - and some to extralinguistic, central-system cognitive processes - central-system pragmatics (Ariel, forthcoming; Kasher, 1982;
Sperber & Wilson, 1986/95). Linguistic pragmatics offers direct form-function correlations where the functions are extralinguistic (functional syntax). Central-system pragmatics (after Fodor, 1983) offers a general-purpose cognitive account for inferential processes used (also, but not exclusively) in utterance interpretation. The latter do not refer to specific linguistic units.

Linguistic pragmatic research focuses on conventional meanings attached to specific linguistic forms, which are non truth-functional and extralinguistic in nature. Such meanings are defined by reference to notions like 'discourse topic', 'new', 'old', or 'accessible' information, and are argued to form part of the speaker's competence in her language (rather than her use practices only). Some functional syntacticians (Kuno, 1972; Prince, 1978), merely argue that language does not tolerate identical paraphrases. Hence, they suggest that semantic paraphrases are pragmatically different in that they impose different constraints on the use of a construction. Functional syntacticians seek to characterize those contexts in which one construction is appropriate where another is not. They then attach an extra-linguistic meaning to marked (nonbasic) constructions. For example, it-clefts (as in It was May who left early) is contrasted with the canonical (May left early) and argued to mark a piece of information, namely, that 'someone left early' as old (Prince, 1978); pronouns signal that the representation in memory of the referent intended is highly accessible, but definite descriptions mark a low degree of mental accessibility (Ariel, 1990).

Another, more radical branch of linguistic pragmatics assigns discoursal communicative functions a more significant role in language analysis. Typological functionalists, such as Chafe (1994), Du Bois (1987), Givón (1979), Hopper and Thompson (1984), and see the grammar as a more or less frozen set of pragmatic/discoursal propensities. In other words, pragmatic meanings do not merely form an additional layer of meaning. Rather, they are the motivation behind the grammatical forms themselves. For example, the universal noun/verb category distinction is a discourse-imposed distinction between discourse participants and discourse events. The concepts communicated do have a propensity for nouniness or for verbhood (concrete objects or actions respectively), but it is their discourse function which determines what concepts are coded by which part of speech. It is argued that all (formal) linguistic universals must be accounted for by pragmatic, discourse patterns.
Linguistic pragmatics is linguistic in that it accounts for linguistic units, be they morphemes, words or whole constructions. Pragmatics, however, is more commonly identified with Gricean nonliteral, inferred meanings, namely, with what we term here central-system theories. Such analyses do not refer to specific linguistic forms, and in fact, are not restricted to linguistic products even.

According to Grice (1975), language use requires the cooperation of the parties involved. Speakers should cue their addressees as to their communicative intention. To be cooperative, speakers should conform to four requirements (maxims): They should provide (a) sufficient (new) information, such that will not be too little or too much in a given situation. This information must be (b) true, verifiable, (c) relevant to the topic discussed, and (d) clear and unambiguous. Following these requirements results in a coherent and straightforward discourse.

On the assumption that speakers do not opt out of cooperation, however, they may deliberately and overtly violate (one or more of) these norms to achieve special goals. 'It's hot in here', for instance, violates the informativeness requirement (a), since, by stating the obvious, it fails to provide new information. The overt violation is a signal to the addressee to go beyond the sentence meaning and generate the speaker's intended contextual meaning (termed conversational implicature). In contrast, a covert violation such as telling a lie (violation of b) does not prompt the addressee to go beyond the linguistic meaning, and results in communication failure. According to Grice, then, making sense of an utterance involves recovering the speaker's intention which often involves going beyond the semantic meaning conveyed. Note that for Grice, linguistic or semantic meaning is equated with literal meaning. Though the Gricean model has been elaborated and improved on (Giora, 1988; Horn, 1984; Kasher, 1982; Levinson, 1983), the basic assumptions remained the same.

An alternative theory to Grice's cooperation-oriented model is Sperber and Wilson's (1986/95) relevance theory. According to relevance theory, human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance (the cognitive principle of relevance): it attends only to information that affects the cognitive environment - that is, enriches its set of assumptions - at a reasonably small cost. Every act of communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (the communicative
principle of relevance). Hearers are equipped with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations, which excludes all but a single interpretation. Unlike the cooperative principle, the principle of relevance need not be 'followed' - it is automatic: it applies without exception and cannot be violated (1986/95: 162).

Distinction between linguistic (including linguistic pragmatic) meanings and (inferred) extralinguistic (central pragmatic) meanings is assumed to have a psychological reality, that is, to involve different interpretative processes. Indeed, according to Grice, comprehenders compute the sentence (literal) meaning first. If it is compatible with the situation or context, it is accepted as the intended meaning and the search is stopped. If it is incompatible with the context, it is rejected and replaced by a compatible, contextually induced (implicated) nonliteral meaning. According to Grice (and Searle, 1979), literal (linguistic) meanings have a privileged status - they are always activated, and are always activated first. Interpreting nonliteral utterances (e.g., metaphor, irony or indirect requests) using central system pragmatics should, therefore, involve a sequential process.

The Gricean dubbed 'standard pragmatic model' is consistent with the view that linguistic, in this case, lexical processes are autonomous and exhaustive: Context does not affect the initial access of a word's lexical meanings. Rather, it selects the appropriate meaning after all the word's meanings have been retrieved (Gernsbacher, 1990; Swinney, 1979).

In contrast to the Gricean comprehension model, some relevance theorists assume that comprehenders need not compute the literal (linguistic) meaning first. Instead, it is the meaning that achieves optimal relevance that enjoys a privileged status, be it literal (linguistic) or figurative (pragmatic). The assumption is that contexts are not given but searched for: Comprehenders access only those contextual assumptions that render a newly stated assumption relevant. The possibility of a sequential process is thus rejected in favor of a direct access model. Such a model posits equivalent processes for both literal (linguistic) and (pragmatically inferred) figurative interpretations. A direct access model is consistent with a selective account of lexical access, according to which context directs access completely, so that only the appropriate meaning is made available for comprehension (Glucksberg, Kreuz & Rho, 1986).
Empirical evidence obtained in the last two decades has been contradictory. On the one hand, literal and nonliteral utterances have been shown to involve similar interpretative process (see Gibbs, 1994 for a review). On the other hand, online measures tapping comprehension processes by measuring reading times at the end of figurative phrases rather than at the end of sentences showed that even when embedded in a rich context, metaphoric phrases required longer processing times than the same phrases used literally (Janus & Bever, 1985). Also, figurative referring expressions were found to take longer to read than their literal equivalents (Gibbs, 1994). Ironic utterances were found to be processed literally initially and to take longer to read when embedded in ironically rather than literally biasing contexts (Giora, Fein and Schwartz, in press).

How can these conflicting findings be reconciled? Rather than distinguishing between literal and nonliteral meanings, the relevant distinction should be between linguistic (including linguistic pragmatic meanings, which are conventional) and extralinguistic pragmatic meanings (which are inferred and nonconventional). Such a distinction is not identical with the literal/nonliteral distinction, because some nonliteral meanings get conventionalized in due course. Once they are fully conventional (Traugott & Konig, 1991), they should be accessed automatically. Indeed, figurative and literal language use be viewed as governed by a general principle of salience, according to which conventional, frequent and familiar meanings are always processed first. According to the salience hypothesis, when for example the nonliteral meaning of conventional idioms (e.g., kick the bucket) is intended, it is accessed directly, because it is a linguistic (conventional) meaning. (Gibbs, 1994). However, when a nonconventional meaning is intended (e.g., the meaning of novel metaphors and ironies), comprehension involves a sequential process, upon which the conventional (linguistic) meaning is processed initially, before the intended (nonliteral, extralinguistic) meaning is derived (Blasko & Connine, 1993; Giora et al., in press, but see Gibbs, 1994 for a different view). This is in line with the gradual process of grammaticizing central pragmatics meanings into linguistic pragmatic ones.

In conclusion, pragmatics, as it is commonly conceived of by linguists, is not a coherent field. Although all pragmatic research relies on language use in context, the role of context is quite different for each branch of pragmatics. Only for central pragmatic interpretations is the specific context crucial, and only for central pragmatic interpretations is the
meaning derived, rather than accessed from the lexicon. The
current tendency is, therefore, to distinguish between two types
of pragmatic research. Linguistic pragmatic phenomena
(information status markers, construction meanings) are
conventional to a large extent, and pattern with grammatical
phenomena psycholinguistically, in that they are accessed
directly and automatically. Central-system pragmatic phenomena
(conversational implicatures, novel metaphors, ironies) are
inferred meanings, generated by addressees on the basis of the
linguistic meaning of the utterance, but most importantly, on the
basis of a set of general-purpose cognitive norms and the
specific context the utterance is embedded in. Such pragmatic
meanings require a sequential process for their derivation.
However, these are prone to processes of grammaticization whereby
they become semantic (idioms).

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