**Chapter I: Introduction to Pragmatics**

**1. Definitions**

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, and the study of linguistics typically includes, among other things, the study of our knowledge of sound systems (phonology), word structure (morphology), and sentence structure (syntax). It is also commonly pointed out that there is an important distinction to be made between our ***competence*** and our ***performance.*** Our competence is our knowledge of the rules of our own idiolect – our own individual internalized system of language that has a great deal in common with the idiolects of other speakers in our com-munity but almost certainly is not identical to any of them. (For example, it’s unlikely that any two speakers share the same set of lexical items.) Our performance, on the other hand, is what we actually do linguistically – including all of our hems and haws, false starts, inter-rupted sentences, and speech errors, as well as our fre-quently imperfect comprehension.

Pragmatics may be roughly defined as the study of language use in context – as compared with semantics, which is the study of literal meaning independent of context. Pragmatic knowledge is part of our knowledge of how to use language appropriately. And as with other areas of linguistic competence, our pragmatic competence is generally implicit – known at some level, but not usually available for explicit examination. For example, it would be difficult for most people to explain how they know that My day was a nightmare means that my day (like a nightmare) was very unpleasant, and not, for ex-ample, that I slept through it. Nightmares have both properties – the property of being very unpleasant and the property of being experienced by someone who is asleep – and yet only one of these properties is under-stood to have been intended by the speaker of the utterance. My day was a nightmare. The study of pragmatics looks at such interpretive regularities and tries to make explicit the implicit knowledge that guides us in selecting interpretations.

Pragmatics, then, has to do with a rather slippery type of meaning, one that isn’t found in dictionaries and which may vary from context to context. The same utterance will mean different things in different contexts, and will even mean different things to different people. The same noun phrase can pick out different things in the world at different times, as evidenced by the phrase this clause. In general terms, pragmatics typically has to do with meaning that is:

• Non-literal,

• Context-dependent,

• Inferential, and/or

• Not truth-conditional.

**2. Situating Pragmatics within the Discipline of Linguistics**

Language use involves a relationship between form and meaning. As noted above, the study of linguistic form involves the study of a number of different levels of linguistic units: **Phonetics** deals with individual speech sounds, **phonology** deals with how these sounds pat-tern systematically within a language, **morphology** deals with the structure of words, and **syntax** deals with the structure of sentences. At each level, these forms may be correlated with meaning. At the phonetic/phonological level, individual sounds are not typically mean-ingful in themselves. However, intonational contours are associated with certain meanings; these associations are the subject of the study of prosody. At the morphological level, individual words and morphemes are conventionally associated with meanings; this is the pur-view of lexical semantics and lexical pragmatics. And at the sentence level, certain structures are conventionally associated with certain meanings (e.g., when two true sentences are joined by and, as in I like pizza and I eat it frequently, we take the resulting conjunction to be true as well); this is the purview of sentential semantics. Above the level of the sentence, we are dealing with pragmatics, including meaning that is inferred based on contextual factors rather than being conventionally associated with a particular utterance.

Pragmatics is closely related to the field of **discourse analysis**. Whereas morphology restricts its purview to the individual word, and syntax focuses on individual sentences, discourse analysis studies strings of sentences produced in a connected discourse. Because pragmatics concentrates on the use of language in context, and the surrounding discourse is part of the context, the concerns of the two fields overlap significantly. Broadly speaking, however, the two differ in focus: Pragmatics uses discourse as data and seeks **to draw generalizations that have predictive power concerning our linguistic competence**, whereas discourse analysis **focuses on the individual discourse, using the findings of pragmatic theory to shed light on how a particular set of interlocutors use and interpret language in a specific context.** In short (and far too simplistically), discourse analysis may be thought of as asking the question “What’s happening in this discourse?,” whereas pragmatics asks the question “What happens in discourse?” Pragmatics draws on natural language data to develop generalizations concerning linguistic behavior, whereas discourse analysis draws on these generalizations in order to more closely investigate natural language data.

**3. Delimiting the Boundary between Pragmatics and Semantics**

Since both semantics and pragmatics deal with issues of linguistic meaning, it would seem to be crucial to distinguish between the two. However, drawing the boundary is not as straightforward as it might appear. For example, semantic meaning is sometimes identified as **context-independent**, whereas pragmatic meaning is said to be **context-dependent**. Alternatively, semantic meaning is often identified as **truth-conditional** meaning, while pragmatic meaning is often identified as meaning that does not affect the truth conditions of the utterance. While both are true most of the time (that is, that semantic meaning is both context-independent and truth-conditional while pragmatic meaning is context-dependent and non-truth-conditional), there are some cases where the two distinctions do not align perfectly.

**4. Methodological Considerations**

It should be noted that (like all of linguistics) the study of pragmatics is inherently descriptive, describing language as it is actually used, rather than prescriptive, prescribing how people “ought” to use it according to some standard. In order to determine what it is that speakers do, linguists have traditionally used one of three basic methods to study language use and variation:

**1. Native-speaker intuitions**

a. Your own (introspection)

b. Someone else’ s (informants)

• questionnaires

• interviews

**2. Psycholinguistic experimentation**

• Lexical decision, eye tracking, etc.

**3.** **Naturally occurring data**

a. Natural observation

b. Corpus data

Because of the nature of the field of pragmatics, it is especially important for researchers in this field to look at spontaneous language use in a naturally occurring context. Intuitions are notoriously unreliable for pragmatic research. Some ingenious psycholinguistic studies have been devised to test pragmatic theories, but much of the current research in pragmatics is based on the study of naturally occurring data.

Finally, the type of hypothesis you are testing should be both **falsifiable** and **predictive**. To say it should be falsifiable is not the same as saying it should be false; rather, there should be some way of testing whether it is true or false, which entails that the test allow for the possibility of its being false and present a clear answer to the question, “If my claim is false, how will this test demonstrate that it’s false?”