PART I

Basic Notions

Defining Pragmatics

1.1 Preliminaries

1.1.1 A look at history

The past twenty-odd years have witnessed an ever-growing interest in pragmatics and pragmatic problems. There have been seven international conferences (Viareggio 1985, Antwerp 1987, Barcelona 1990, Kobe 1993, Mexico 1996, Reims 1998, Budapest 2000). The International Pragmatics Association, IPrA, has been in existence for more than fifteen years; two international journals (the *Journal of Pragmatics* since 1977; *Pragmatics* since 1991) are currently publishing, between the two of them, close to 3,000 yearly pages (in thirteen, respectively four issues). Many other (official and unofficial) publications, newsletters and so on have seen the light (some of which have survived, some not); add to this an unestablished number of working papers, theses, dissertations, book series and books on pragmatic topics (among the latter, at least six major reference works and textbooks as well as a *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*; 1998), and the picture is complete. Pragmatics has come into its own, and it is here to stay.

But even allowing that this is a spectacular development, it still is the case that pragmatics didn't just 'happen' by itself, appearing out of nowhere. We must ask ourselves: how could pragmatics expand so fast and become such a popular trend in such a relatively short time?

The answer to this question is important, as it may give us a first approximation to a better understanding of what pragmatics *is*, and thus lead us to a tentative definition – a definition that will have to be supplemented with a description of what pragmatics *does*, even though it is notoriously difficult to limit the field in such a way that we can say where pragmatics stops, and the 'beyond' begins.[1]

The first efforts at establishing something like a pragmatic approach to linguistics date back to the late sixties and early seventies (as evidenced in work by Ross, Lakoff and others). What we see there is the collapse of earlier theories and hypotheses (in particular, of the 'syntax-only' approach of Chomsky and his followers). Slowly and with intermittent success, a new model emerged: pragmatics was in the making, even though initially its practitioners were not aware of this themselves. (Some would even say that we are dealing with a 'paradigm shift' in the sense defined by Kuhn 1964.)

Naturally, a necessary development such as this one can only be established in a historical hindsight that allows us to observe how the old paradigm came under attack, and how the contours of a new one gradually took shape. All one could see at the time was a growing number of unexplained (and, in fact, unexplainable) observations, giving rise to numerous theoretical paradoxes. Many of these were first noticed, not by linguists, but by philosophers working in the gray zone where philosophy and linguistics share a border. Others came to the attention of linguists trying to overstep the narrow boundaries of syntax and (later also) semantics.[2]

To name but a few of these phenomena: there was the troubled relationship of language with logic, as originally evidenced in the realm of syntax, but subsequently also in that of semantics; I will come back to these problems in section 2.3. Then there were the closely related linguistic problems that arose from the prestigious, but forever hidden, tenet that a linguistic description had to be syntax-based or at least syntax-oriented to be valid. It turned out that extrasyntactic, indeed extralinguistic factors played a major role in what was called the 'rules of the language'. Furthermore, there were difficulties of how to interpret and treat certain assumptions (called 'presuppositions') that somehow guided our understanding of language, yet could not be easily formulated in any of the available frameworks (see further section 2.5). And finally, the whole gamut of problems having to do with users and contexts turned out to be a decisive factor in determining the meaning of what is being uttered at any given time, at any given place (see further the next section and section 2.6).

The 'pragmatic turn' in linguistics can thus be described as a shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax) to the paradigm of the language user. The latter notion is of particular importance for defining pragmatics, since it brings a number of observations to the same practical denominator, as we will see in the following.

1.1.2   The importance of being a user

Most definitions of pragmatics pay lip service to Charles Morris's famous definition of pragmatics as "the study of the relation of signs to interpreters" (1938:6). In a modern, communication-oriented terminology, we prefer to talk about 'messages' and 'language users'; in contrast to traditional linguistics, which first and

foremost concentrates on the elements and structures (such as sounds and sentences) that the language users produce, pragmatics focuses on the language-using humans. Put differently, pragmatics is interested in the process of producing language and in its *producers*, not just in the end-*product*, language.

If pragmatics, as suggested in the previous section, indeed is a new paradigm (or program) of research, it is obliged to come up with a new definition of the object of that research. What would such a new definition imply with regard to the research object in question, language, in its 'old' vs. its 'new' interpretation: language as a human product vs. language in its human use? One could, of course, simply divide the study of language into two, pretty much independent, parts: one, a description of its structure (as dealt with by the traditional methods of grammars), the other, a description of its use (to be taken care of by pragmatics).

The proper domain of pragmatics would then be what Chomsky has called *performance*, that is to say, the way the individual goes about using language. This concrete linguistic practice would be distinguished from an abstract *competence*, understood as the user's knowledge of the language and its rules. This viewpoint is neatly captured by Katz, who says: "Grammars are theories about the structure of sentence types . . . Pragmatic theories, in contrast, . . . explicate the reasoning of speakers and hearers" (1977:19).

However, some major questions remain: how to delimit pragmatics vis-à-vis syntax and semantics (let alone phonology)? What is the role of pragmatics in the so-called 'hyphenated areas' of research (psycho-, neuro-, socio-, ethno-, . . . etc. linguistics)? How about newer research areas such as mathematical and computational linguistics, discourse linguistics, not to forget the vast field covered by the term 'applied linguistics'? Whatever the outcome of our quest for a definition and delimitation, the language user is in the center of attention in pragmatics. Thus, we can talk about the 'user's point of view' as a common orienting feature for pragmatic research.

Still, for a number of reasons, this does not give us a satisfactory definition. For one thing, there are the various pragmaticians' varying interpretations of the term 'use of language', as well as of what is implied by the role of the language user. For instance, one can either consider 'language use' to be whatever happens when users are 'doing things with words'; or, following a more restrictive procedure, one can demand that pragmatics refer *explicitly* to a user, whenever language is discussed.[3] I will discuss the latter viewpoint first.

Levinson demands that "explicit reference [be] made to the speaker, or to put it in more general terms, to the user of the language" (1983:2–3). Accordingly, having discussed and rejected a number of definitions, Levinson's own suggestion is to consider pragmatics as being . . . "the study of those relations between language and context that are *grammaticalized*, or encoded in the structure of a language" (p. 9; emphasis in original).

This definition accepts only those uses of language as pragmatically relevant that have a distinct grammatical expression, i.e., that operate with phonological,

morphological and syntactic elements under the direction of grammatical rules; this is what Levinson means by 'grammaticalized'. He does not tell us, however, how we may connect user and grammar, or how language and context relate, with or without grammar's helping hand (the problem of 'contextualization'; see section 3.1).

The other point of view takes language use to be whatever happens when users are 'doing things' in and with language; pragmatics comprises everything that characterizes people as users of language. Some (like Levinson) have called this a "very broad usage of the term [pragmatics]"; in fact, it is but a natural extension of the notion of pragmatics as a theory of use. Also, it "still [is] the one generally used on the Continent", as Levinson further comments, somewhat regretfully, it might seem (1983:2). It rests on the assumption that the language users, being members of society, depend on the rules and norms that are valid at any time, in any place, in the community they belong to.[4]

The next section will expand on this societal character of pragmatics in order to arrive at a definition and clear up some of the 'boundary problems' that we have encountered.

1.2   Pragmatics: definition and delimitation

1.2.1   A definition

As we have seen in the previous section, restricting pragmatics to purely linguistic matters is not an acceptable point of view for those who want to include the whole of human language use (even though such a restriction may strengthen the definition as such; Levinson 1983:11). So-called 'extralinguistic' factors can only be excluded from a pragmatic evaluation on the penalty of neglecting the user. A truly pragmatic consideration has to deal with the users in their *social context*; it cannot limit itself to the grammatically encoded aspects of contexts, as the 'grammaticalization requirement' seems to imply.

Communication in society happens chiefly by means of language. However, the users of language, as social beings, communicate and use language on society's premises; society controls their access to the linguistic and communicative means. Pragmatics, as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they affect, and effectualize, human language use. Hence:

Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.[5]

Having propounded this definition, our next task will be to look into what characterizes pragmatics in relation to its closest neighbors. 'To define' means:

to impose an end or a boundary (cf. the Latin word *finis* 'end'; plural *fines* 'frontier'). 'Defining pragmatics' thus implies determining its frontiers with other, adjoining fields of research within (and possibly also outside) linguistics.

Unfortunately, the definitions that have been offered (including the one suggested above) do not delimit pragmatics either clearly and neatly, or to everybody's satisfaction. Many authors confine themselves to a strictly linguistically oriented definition (like the one I criticized in the preceding section); alternatively, they resort to a definition that, while incorporating as much societal context as possible, necessarily remains vague as regards the relation between pragmatics and the other areas of linguistics (even leaving aside the problem of these areas' autonomy vis-à-vis linguistics proper).

But why do we need clear, sharply demarcated boundaries at all, when pragmatics is in constant development, so that boundary markers, once placed, will have to be moved all the time? Maybe a 'pragmatic' definition of pragmatics could be found that avoids both the Scylla and Charybdis of the above alternative?

In the literature, such an idea seems to have been received with some enthusiasm. The most prominent representative of this 'pragmatic eclecticism' is Geoffrey Leech, who advocates *complementarity* as his solution to the dilemma. This is what he says about the relation between pragmatics and its nearest linguistic neighbor, semantics: "The view that semantics and pragmatics are distinct, though complementary and interrelated fields of study, is easy to appreciate subjectively, but is more difficult to justify in an objective way. It is best supported negatively, by pointing out the failures or weaknesses of alternative views" (1983:6).

Leech distinguishes between three possible ways of structuring this relationship: semanticism (pragmatics inside semantics), pragmaticism (semantics inside pragmatics) and complementarism (semantics and pragmatics complement each other, but are otherwise independent areas of research).

As an instance of *semanticism*, one can mention the way people such as Searle originally were dealing with the problem of *speech acts*. For instance, when I utter a promise, do I then 'make' a promise because of the semantics of the verb 'to promise', or because of its 'active', pragmatic character? Clearly, the former solution forces the problem onto the Procrustean bed of what could be called 'pragmantics', a true pragma–semantic chimera.[6]

In contrast to this, consider the way Austin dealt with this problem. For him, the only real issue at stake was the effect that our words have when uttered, and the 'things' we can 'do' with them. In Leech's terminology, this means that the pragmatic aspect of language is the only really interesting one: clearly a case of *pragmaticism*.[7]

Finally, it seems plausible to assume that the main reason why Austin's work stayed unknown territory for so many linguists for such a long time was precisely the same anxiety that innovative views traditionally inspire in those that are concerned about territorial rights and privileges, and hence worry about

boundaries. Professionally established syntacticians or semanticists want to continue doing their work in their own, accustomed ways; the moment some people start telling them how to do linguistics, their territorial integrity is in danger. So, in order not to rock the boat, most traditionally oriented linguists prefer to assign pragmatics to a quiet corner, preferably a little bit outside of linguistics proper; here, pragmaticists can do their own thing, in a complementary relationship with the rest, but still clearly distinguished from it. This is how *complementarism* solves the delimitation problem.

This last alternative seems still to be the preferred solution to the boundary problem. Levinson, discussing the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, remarks: "From what we now know about the nature of meaning, a hybrid or modular account seems inescapable; there remains the hope that with two components, a semantics and a pragmatics working in tandem, each can be built on relatively homogeneous and systematic lines" (1983:15).

An alternative solution to the problem of delimiting pragmatics will be discussed in the next sections.

1.2.2   Component, perspective or function?

1.2.2.1   *Component vs. perspective*

The question raised in the preceding section was basically how to divide the linguistic pie, and where, once cut up, the individual pieces should go. The discussion was entirely framed in what one could call the 'component view' of linguistics. This view, popular ever since Chomsky's early works (1957, 1965) and maintained faithfully by his followers despite their internal differences, assumes that the grammar of a language consists of several 'components' (a phonological one, a syntactic one, and a semantic one, to name the most important). The components correspond to different human abilities, and can be differentiated, for instance, in the case of brain damage (e.g., syntactic or so-called Broca's aphasia is very different from Wernicke's aphasia, which mainly affects the semantics of language).

The component view is essentially based on a 'modular' conception of the human mind. In this conception (which remains quite popular among today's cognitive scientists and computer-oriented psychologists), the human faculties are thought of as independent but cooperating units. In contrast, a 'perspective' view of human language activity, as the name indicates, 'perspectivizes', focuses on, that activity in its various aspects. Cf. "Linguistic pragmatics . . . can be said to characterize a new way of looking at things linguistic [i.e., a 'perspective'], rather than marking off clear borderlines to other disciplines" (Haberland and Mey 1977:5).

Thus, a *pragmatic* perspective will focus on the societal factors that make a certain language use more or less acceptable, in contrast to other, perhaps abstractly equivalent, but pragmatically radically different (because mostly unac-

ceptable) uses. Theoretically speaking, a Black inner-city dialect of English may be just as good as any other English dialect (Labov 1966), but in a pragmatic perspective, such a statement makes little sense: one simply cannot do the same things with Black as with Standard English in most societal surroundings. Here, the 'inner city' (or the 'urban' environment, as it is now somewhat euphemistically called) is the exception that confirms the rule: in order to pursue any sort of career in 'mainstream' society, knowledge, and use, of the standard language is *de rigueur*.

In the spirit of our "new way of looking at things linguistic", Verschueren has recently characterized *pragmatics* as "*a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour*" (Verschueren 1999:7; italics in original). According to Verschueren, "pragmatics does not constitute an additional component of a theory of language, but it offers a different *perspective*" (ibid.:2), a perspective, moreover, which constitutes "a radical departure from the established component view which tries to assign to pragmatics its own set of linguistic features in contradistinction with phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics" (Verschueren 1987:36).

But what difference does such a 'radical departure' make? In the component view of linguistics, each 'module' works within a properly delimited domain, with well-defined objects and properly established, specific methods. Thus, phonetics and phonology busy themselves with speech sounds and phonemes, and leave syntactic objects such as sentences to the syntacticians. Similarly, the syntactic component does not interfere in the workings of semantics except in a sideways fashion. Neither does the semantic component meddle in pragmatic affairs, except when some philosopher forces it to (the case of 'pragmantics', referred to earlier).

In contrast, a perspectivist view emphasizes the pragmatic aspects of all parts of linguistics, including psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and other 'hyphenated' areas. On this view, the variables of sociology (such as income, housing, degree of education etc.) and psychology (such as IQ, character traits, sexual orientation etc.) would then be integrated in a pragmatics of the 'languaging' human as a social being. Thus, the pragmatic perspective could serve as an 'umbrella' for the various components and areas of linguistics; in accordance with a suggestion made by Östman (1988b:28), one could have the 'component' and the 'perspective' views existing side by side, so as to expand, rather than narrow, our epistemological horizon.

Thus, we could have a pragmatic component, understood as the set of whatever pragmatic functions can be assigned to language, along with a pragmatic perspective, i.e., the way these functions operate. We could either ask how users 'mean what they say', that is, how they communicate, using language, or how they 'say what they mean', employing the linguistic devices at their disposal to express themselves.

All this is nicely summarized by Östman as follows: "[if] the unit of analysis in semantics simply [is] *meaning*: the meanings of words, phrases, larger con-

structions, prosody, and so on, . . . then by the same token, the 'unit' of analysis for pragmatics could be said to be the *functioning of language*" (1988b:28; emphasis in original).

1.2.2.2   *Function*

The use of the term 'functioning' in the above quotation does by no means represent a recent development in linguistic thinking. As early as the mid-thirties, the German psychologist Karl Bühler elaborated his famous functional triangle of *Ausdruck, Appell* and *Darstellung* (roughly, 'expression' or 'manifestation', (speech) 'appeal' and 'representation') as characteristic of language (1934:29);[8] and in the sixties, Roman Jakobson elaborated on the Bühlerian model by adding three more functions: code, channel and poetic quality (1960:350ff).

Underlying these models of human language is a common sense of the importance of the user in the communicative process. Messages are not just 'signals', relayed through impersonal channels; the human expression functions as an appeal to other users and as a means of social togetherness.

One advantage of looking at linguistic phenomena this way is that it allows us to consolidate the different agendas of the 'componentialists' and the 'perspectivists'. Whereas the former mainly are interested in technical matters such as presuppositions, implicatures, deixis and so on (see further chapters 3 and 7), a typical perspectivist wants to deal with concepts such as "negotiability, adaptability and variability, motivations, effects, etc." (Östman 1988b:29). Both viewpoints can be brought together by considering the communicative function of language against the background of the available linguistic techniques, while conversely placing these techniques in a functional-communicative perspective.

Linguistic functions of use are best studied in situations where people interact normally, using language face to face, as in everyday conversation. There are basically two ways of studying this fundamental linguistic interaction: one, we can observe what's going on and try to describe, as exactly as possible, the participants' choices of expressing themselves to their own and others' satisfaction, as well as their options to join in at any given point of the conversation. This approach is taken in conversational analysis (see further chapter 6).[9]

Another approach goes 'behind' the conversation, as it were, establishing the minimal conditions for successful interaction both on the linguistic level and (maybe even more importantly) on the hidden levels of societal equality or inequality, of prejudice and class feeling, education and culture. Such an approach represents the linguistic dimension of social interaction; it is essentially a *pragmatic* one. Without this background information, successful conversation, "the sustained production of chains of mutually-dependent acts, constructed by two or more agents each monitoring and building on the actions of the other" (Levinson 1983:44), is both impossible in itself and impossible to understand.

In order to better realize what is involved here, let's do a thought experiment. Suppose we had to instruct two extraterrestrial beings in conversational tech-

niques, what would we have to teach them? This problem is astonishingly similar to that of figuring out what it would take to teach a computer to understand human language, or even speak 'as' a human (Schank 1984:91–2). For one, we would have to teach our Elizas or 'ETs' the language itself: grammar, dictionary, pronunciation etc. But besides, we would have to specify, for each situation, what kind of language functions best.

Following Goffman, the constraints that operate in these cases can be separated into constraints belonging to the system (the grammar) and constraints of a ritual nature (the function), "where the first label[s] the ingredients essential to sustaining any kind of systematic interweaving of actions by more than one party, and the second those ingredients that, while not essential to the maintaining of the interaction, are nevertheless typical of it – they are, if one likes, the social dimensions of interaction" (1976:266–7). The latter constraints belong properly in the realm of 'metapragmatics', as we will see in chapter 7.

1.3   What use is pragmatics?

1.3.1   Theory and practice

The use of pragmatics can be characterized in different ways, depending on how we view linguistics and how we place pragmatics within it.

An *abstract* characterization will place emphasis on pragmatics either as a 'component' of linguistics (like phonology, syntax and semantics) or as a 'perspective' pervading the components and giving them a pragmatic 'accent'.

A *practical* characterization of the tasks and functions of pragmatics takes its point of departure in the traditional problems that linguistic research has grappled with over the years, and for which pragmatics provides a novel solution. Among these are the numerous practical problems that we meet in the exercise of our linguistic functions. Many of these problem areas have been opened up to pragmatics from the 'outside': problems of conversation and turn-control (ethnomethodology; see chapter 6); problems of argumentation (philosophy; see section 2.3); problems of language use in educational settings (applied linguistics; see chapter 11); problems of interaction between humans and computers (computer software and design; see Gorayska and Mey 1996; Mey 2000b); and in general, all sorts of communication problems in anthropology, ethnography, psychiatry and psychology, the public language inside and outside of social institutions, rhetoric, the media sciences, educational sciences, and so on and so forth. Other clusters of problems are more in the traditional vein: ambiguity of utterances, 'lazy' reference of pronouns, 'voice' in narrative and other texts and so on. The next section will give some examples; other problems will be discussed throughout the book.

A further question, of course, is what we need pragmatics for, and what its goals are; this also will be the subject of the following sections.

1.3.2   Uses and aims

1.3.2.1   Why do we need pragmatics?

What does pragmatics have to offer that cannot be found in good old-fashioned linguistics? What do pragmatic methods give us in the way of greater understanding of how the human mind works, how humans communicate, how they manipulate one another, and in general, how they use language?

The general answer is: pragmatics is needed if we want a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior.

A more practical answer would be: outside of pragmatics, no understanding; sometimes, a pragmatic account is the only one that makes sense, as in the following example, borrowed from David Lodge's *Paradise News*:

> 'I just met the old Irishman and his son, coming out of the toilet.'
> 'I wouldn't have thought there was room for the two of them.'
> 'No silly, I mean *I* was coming out of the toilet. They were waiting.' (1992:65)

How do we know what the first speaker meant? Linguists usually say that the first sentence is ambiguous, and they excel at producing such sentences as:

> Flying planes can be dangerous

or:

> The missionaries are ready to eat

in order to show what is meant by 'ambiguous': a word, phrase, or sentence that can mean either one or the other of two (or even several) things.

For a pragmatician, this is, of course, glorious nonsense. In real life, that is, among real language users, there is no such thing as ambiguity – excepting certain, rather special occasions, on which one tries to deceive one's partner, or 'keep a door open'. A famous example is the answer that the ancient oracle in Delphi gave the king of Epirus, Pyrrhus, when he asked what would happen if he attacked the Romans. The answer was that the king would destroy a great empire; whereupon he set out to win the battle, but lose the war, thus ultimately fulfilling the prophecy and destroying his own empire.[10]

In the dialogue from *Paradise News* cited above, the first speaker knows what she means; the misunderstanding is on the part of the hearer, but there is strictly speaking no ambiguity. The misunderstanding is furthermore cleared up in the next round; but notice that this can only happen in real dialogue: if we don't have a user to tell us what she or he means, we may speculate until the end of our days on the hidden meaning of utterances that are never brought

to bear on a concrete situation, with real language users involved.[11] Ambiguity only exists outside of the actual speaking situation; abstract sentences can be ambiguous, real speakers are not (unless they want to – as, e.g., in telling a joke, where the ambiguity is intended; see Kittay 1987:80; Nerlich and Clarke 2000 in press).

Often, it is said that we must invoke the context to determine what an ambiguous sentence means. This may be OK, if by 'context' we understand all the factors that play a role in producing and understanding utterances. But 'context' is a notoriously hard concept to deal with (I shall have more to say on this later; see section 3.1); in particular, it is often restricted to a kind of 'prehistory' of a particular utterance, the sum and result of what has been said and done up to now.

The concept of context that is invoked here is a purely static one; it bears a certain likeness to the thinking of classical physics, where the conditions preceding a particular state of affairs in the physical world are thought of as completely determining the next development. However, language is not a controlled experiment in the physics classroom or in the laboratory. Whoever says: 'Give me all the information, and I'll predict what is going to happen, what this or that utterance is supposed to mean' is at best a would-be pragmatician. In such a conceptual framework, no matter how hard we 'milk' the context, we will never arrive at a pragmatic understanding.

Consider the following dialogue:

(*Two linguists, call them Jacob and Mark, are coming out of a lecture hall at a university which is neither's home territory, but where Jacob has been before; so he thinks he knows the campus, more or less*)

JACOB: "Do you know the way back to the dining hall? We can go in my car."

(*Mark gets into the car; after the first turn, he starts giving directions, which greatly amazes Jacob, and irritates him a little; he was under the impression that* he *needed to guide the other, not the other way round. After several more turns – which Jacob is taking at greater and greater speeds, so the other doesn't get a chance to interfere – Mark says:*)

MARK: "Oh, I thought you *didn't* know the way to the campus."

(*To which Jacob replies:*)

JACOB: 'I thought *you* didn't know!'
(*whereupon they both start laughing*).

In a case like this, the classical concept of 'context' as 'that which has been the case up to and including the present moment' makes no sense. There is no way in which the original utterance 'Do you know the way back to the dining hall?' can be interpreted correctly. Clearly, Mark takes Jacob's utterance not as a 'real' question, but as a 'pre-request' for information (see section 6.3.2).

Jacob, on the other hand, assumed that Mark was not familiar with the campus, and so wanted to give him a ride. This is why he was surprised at Mark giving him directions: that activity only makes sense if you know where you're going.

The moment the situation is resolved, we can look back and understand what has happened: but the correct 'illocutionary force' (see section 5.1.3) of the first utterance could not have been 'predicted' on the basis of the context, understood as: what had happened before. Such a concept of context is established independently of the ongoing interaction between the interlocutors, and for this reason is completely useless. The *dynamic* development of the conversation, that which gives us the clue to an understanding, cannot be predicted, as it depends entirely on the individuals and their individual choices at every moment.

We are all familiar with these phenomena from our daily lives. Take the case of family fights and other arguments. As our mother used to say, 'One word takes the other, and you never know where you're ending up.' Afterwards, one looks back and is unable to understand how all this happened, and how things came to be said "which are not easily forgotten" (Robert L. Stevenson, *Kidnapped*), with sometimes terrible consequences for one's relationships with other persons.

A dynamic context is an environment that is in steady development, prompted by the continuous interaction of the people engaged in language use. Context is the quintessential pragmatic concept; it is by definition *proactive*, just as people are. By contrast, a pure linguistic description is retroactive and static: it takes a snapshot of what is the case at any particular moment, and tries to freeze that picture. Pure descriptions have no dynamics; they can never capture the richness of the developments that take place between people using language; the synchronic snapshot of the 'here and now', the classical *hic et nunc*, is a philosophical abstraction.

This brings me to a final point. If pragmatic linguistics defines itself as opposed to descriptive linguistics, what are its declared aims?

1.3.2.2   *The aims of pragmatics*

In linguistics, it has long been an article of faith that the science of language has to be practiced for its own sake. Linguists have talked about the 'immanence' of linguistic theory, by which they mean that linguistics is accountable only to itself as to its methods and objectives. Historically, this has been understandable in a relatively young science such as linguistics: it needed to become independent of the surrounding sciences, and to carve out its own domain, so to speak. But for a developed science, the desire for immanence is not a sign of maturity; on the contrary. The immanent approach to the study of language has tended to isolate its different aspects, and in many cases the practitioners of linguistics have not been able to talk to each other except in very general terms. When it comes to

doing things for a purpose, such as describing languages, often thought of as the prime practical endeavor of linguists, the consensus remains largely theoretical. Here is an example.

In the course of the past decades, it has become increasingly clear that the descriptive endeavor of linguistics is in great danger of being irrevocably thwarted. All description is strictly a terminal process, that is, a process with a built-in *terminus ad quem*: when everything has been described that there is to describe, description has to come to an end.

In the heydays of description, this never used to be a real concern: there were always enough languages to describe. The times when every Ph.D. candidate in linguistics could travel to the 'field' and pick himself or herself a language to work on are not so long past, after all.

However, with the ever-increasing westernization and industrialization of the Third and Fourth Worlds, many languages of those worlds have begun to disappear at an ever-more rapid speed. According to fact-based projections, we are looking at a loss of languages in the order of several thousand in the next fifty years or so. Linguists speak of 'endangered languages', and vote on resolutions about what to do to 'save' those languages.

For the describer, it is clearly a loss to have one's potential object of description vanish from under one's eyes. And as long as the purpose of descriptive linguistics is to go 'out there' and collect as many as possible of the vanishing species of languages, it is clearly a catastrophe when those species start disappearing on a grand scale. The linguistic remedy for this evil is to save the languages by accelerating and perfecting the descriptive process, through better targeted and more generous funding, through the training of native linguists, through providing teachers and other personnel that can help in 'alphabetizing' those mostly unwritten and unrecorded languages, so that we at least may have some documentation to show our successors in the trade, and can parry the reproach of having squandered away the linguistic patrimony of generations to come, by saying: 'Here's what we've done – it may not be perfect, but we did our best.'

However, the best in this case isn't good enough. Description, as the ultimate aim of linguistic science, digs its own grave; but when all is said and done, describing the language that has disappeared has not done a thing for the people that went with it. The question: why do languages disappear, and what can we do about the causes of this linguistic decay? is seldom raised. In other words, saving languages is thought of as a process of putting away, cataloguing, describing; not as a process that saves the languages by saving their *users*, providing the latter with living conditions that allow them to continue using their languages. A pragmatic look at the problems of endangered languages tells us not just to go out there and describe, but to fight what has been called 'linguistic genocide', or 'linguicide', for short (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994). The next chapter will go into more detail as to what such a 'pragmatic look' is all about.

Review and discussion

1. One of the tasks of pragmatics is to explain how the same content is expressed differently in different (cultural, religious, professional etc.) contexts. Often, such contexts will be linguistically different, as is the case from language community to language community. The following is an example of this.

In the US, whenever an interstate highway starts climbing a hill, you will find that a new, 'slow' lane is added to the right of the (usually) two already existing ones. This lane is destined for trucks and other slower vehicles, to prevent them from clogging up the traffic in the faster lanes. On a sign posted well in advance of the widened pavement, you will read the following text:

SLOWER TRAFFIC KEEP RIGHT

However, in Canada the same situation may be 'worded' differently:

KEEP RIGHT EXCEPT TO PASS

In terms of our discussion above, we may say that the semantic content of the two expressions is partly the same ('Keep right'), partly different (a reference to 'slower traffic' as compared with 'to pass') – yet the signs seem to *function* in more or less the same way.

Questions:
Using Östman's definition at the end of section 1.2.2.1, would you say the expressions are pragmatically different?

Is there another difference that could be called 'pragmatic', taking the 'user aspect' into consideration? Would there be a possible difference in effect?

2. (Due to Alvaro G. Meseguer) During a strike among the crew personnel of the Spanish airline Iberia in 1990, the following bilingual document was presented to the travelers. Read the text, paying special attention to the first sentence in each version.

Estimado cliente:

Debido a la huelga de nuestros Tripulantes de Cabina de Pasajeros, Vd. recibirá a bordo un servicio distinto al habitual.
    IBERIA está haciendo todo lo posible para reducir su incidencia en nuestros clientes . . .
    Muchas gracias. Recibe un cordial saludo.

Dear Customer,

The industrial action being taken by our cabin crew means that the on-board services you receive will not be those which we normally offer our passengers.

IBERIA is doing everything possible to minimize the inconvenience to our clients. . . .

Thank you very much. Sincerely yours,

(sign.) Pilar Villanueva

Explanatory commentary and questions:
The above notice, by its bilingual nature, aims at an audience in which there are speakers of English as well as of Spanish. *A priori*, one would assume that the contents of the message to both classes of readers would be identical (no semantic difference).

Do you think this is the case? (For those not familiar with Spanish, it should be pointed out that the word *huelga* means 'strike'.)

Why do you think the Spanish text uses the word 'strike', whereas its English counterpart has 'industrial action'?

Is there a difference of content (a semantic difference) between the two messages?

Is there any reason for the English text to avoid using the word 'strike' in this context?

In terms of a 'fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior' (cf. section 1.3.2.1), which of the two versions is, in your opinion, the best qualified, pragmatically speaking?

3. The following cases all have to do with ambiguity (cf. section 1.3.2.1).
   (a) Consider the following excerpt:

'What are we going to do about Baba', she asked.
'What do you mean?'
'She can't remember anything.'
'Did she ask you whether she was taking medicine?'
→'No.'
'No she's not or no she didn't ask?'
'She didn't ask.'
'She was supposed to,' I said.
'Well, she didn't.' (Don Delillo, *White Noise*. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1986. p. 61)

In the above excerpt, the arrow (→) indicates an ambiguous utterance: 'No.' In the next reply, the interlocutor tries to find out what the 'No' is supposed to

negate: the main clause 'Did she ask you' or the dependent clause 'whether she was taking medicine'.

From a strictly grammatical (syntactic) viewpoint, the 'No' should not be taken to refer to a clause within a clause: 'No' negates the main verb in the receding sentence 'Did' ('No, she didn't'). The fact, however, that the interlocutor is prompted to ask for an explanation shows that pragmatically, a negation can have another 'scope' than strictly syntactical.

(b) Consider now the following examples, all containing a negation ('No') along with a noun. Usually, this kind of construction is not difficult to handle; it is often used in connection with some prohibition, injunction, etc. ('No Smoking', 'No Pets' etc.). However, the three examples below exhibit some apparent irregularities. Try to identify what they negate, and how this can be explained from a pragmatic point of view. (Hint: when in doubt try to construct a suitable context in which the 'No's make sense.)

(1) 'No Parking Violators Will Be Towed Away' (sign in San Juan, Pwerto Rico; example due to Bruce Fraser)

(2) 'No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service' (sign on door of the Bevo Shop on 'The Drag', the university portion of Guadalupe Street in Austin, Tex.)

(3) 'No Checks, No Exceptions' (hand-lettered notice on the cashier's counter in the cafeteria of the University of Chicago 59th Street campus)

(c) In the dialogue in (a) above, you will find nine occurrences of the pronoun 'she'. Reading the dialogue, you should have little difficulty in establishing the identity of the various persons referred to.

Questions:
Is there an occurrence that causes you some trouble? Which? How do you explain it (away)?

How does this example compare to the one quoted in 1.3.2.1 about the old Irishman and his son? (Hint: syntactic vs. pragmatic ambiguity.)

What is 'she was supposed to' (last turn but one) referring to? How do you know?

Do you think the last reply is ambiguous? Why (not)?