

What is pragmatics?

TASK 1

What do these children still need to learn about using language?

A little boy comes in the front door.

Mother: *Wipe your feet, please.*

He removes his muddy shoes and socks and carefully wipes his clean feet on the doormat.

A father is trying to get his 3-year-old daughter to stop lifting up her dress to display her new underwear to the assembled guests.

Father: *We don't DO that.*

Daughter: *I KNOW, Daddy. You don't WEAR dresses.*

Paraphrase

What does *Cats drink cream* mean?

When asked what a sentence means, people usually provide another sentence that has virtually the same meaning, a paraphrase. There are a variety of ways that you could paraphrase *Cats drink cream*. You could change a/ individual words b/ the sentence structure, or c/ both the individual words and the sentence structure. Here are some possible paraphrases for our sentence:

Domestic felines consume the liquid fat of milk.

Cream is drunk by cats.

The liquid fat of milk is drunk by domestic felines.

Mike, Annie and Mike's cat, Felix, are in Mike's kitchen. What did Annie mean?

Mike: *What happened to that bowl of cream?*

Annie: *Cats drink cream.*

Semantic meaning/paraphrase: Domestic felines consume the liquid fat of milk.

Pragmatic meaning/paraphrase: Felix probably drank the cream.

Linguists often make the distinction between a sentence and an utterance.

Pragmatics analyses language in use. Many of the utterances we use do not consist of full sentences, yet are entirely understandable in context:

Jane: *Coffee?*

Steve: *Sure!*

Jane? *White?*

Steve: *Black.*

A/ *It's cold in here.*

SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.

PP: Let's eat in the kitchen.

B/ *It's cold in here.*

SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.

PP: James, shut the window.

C/ *It's cold in here.*

SP: The temperature in this place is frigid.

PP: The orchids aren't blooming because the greenhouse is too cold.

SUMMARY

- Language meaning can be analysed at several levels.
- Semantics concentrates on the meaning that comes from linguistic knowledge, while pragmatics concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account our knowledge about the physical and social world.
- The focus of pragmatic analysis is on the meaning of speakers' utterances rather than on the meaning of words or sentences.
- Utterances need not consist of complete sentences. Each utterance is a unique physical event created at a particular point in time for a particular communicative purpose.

TASK 2

Consider the following three different utterances with similar pragmatic meanings even though each of them has a different semantic meaning.

This room is a pigsty!

How many times have I told you about this room?

Clean this room up.

TASK 3

For the following short dialogues, provide three alternatives for the underlined utterances! Each alternative should potentially have a similar pragmatic meaning, even though the semantic meaning would be different.

A/ Matt: *Do you want some cake?*

Chris: *I'm on a diet.*

B/ Ed: *How was the party?*

Faye: *Don't ask!*

C/ Matt: *Lend me a pen.*

Chris: *Here. But it's running out of ink.*

TASK 4

FOUR DEFINITIONS OF PRAGMATICS:

Choose which of the following definitions of pragmatics is best in your opinion.

1/ Pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others.

(Crystal 1987: 120)

2/ Pragmatics can be usefully defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations.

(Leech 1983: x)

3/ Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said.

(Yule 1996: 3)

4/ There is a distinction between a hearer's knowledge of her language and her knowledge of the world. In this section, I shall argue that it is this distinction that underlies the distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

(Blakemore 1992: 39)