

PRAGMATICS, UNIVERSALS IN

Changing Prospects for Universals in Pragmatics

The term PRAGMATICS has come to denote the study of general principles of language use. It is usually understood to contrast with SEMANTICS, the study of encoded meaning, and also, by some authors, to contrast with **SOCIOLINGUISTICS** and the ethnography of speaking, which are more concerned with local sociocultural practices. Given that pragmaticists come from disciplines as varied as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, communication studies, psychology, and anthropology, it is not surprising that definitions of pragmatics vary. Nevertheless, most authors agree on a list of topics that come under the rubric, including **DEIXIS**, PRESUPPOSITION, implicature (see CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE), SPEECH-ACTS, and conversational organization (see CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS). Here, we can use this extensional definition as a starting point (Levinson 1988; Huang 2007).

With the rise of GENERATIVE GRAMMAR, and the insistence on universals of grammar (see UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR), anthropologists began to emphasize the diversity of language use, implicitly accepting the underlying uniformity of grammar

(Hymes 1982). But with the growth of linguistic **TYPOLOGY** and the empirical search for language universals, it has become increasingly clear that real universals - in the straightforward sense, properties that all languages have - are vanishingly rare (at least beyond the basic organizational principles outlined by Hockett 1960, and some of the architectural properties sketched by Jackendoff 2002). Instead, linguistic typologists have found that empirical generalizations are nearly always of the kind "Across all languages, if a language has property X, then it probably also has property Y." Meanwhile, generative grammarians have hoped to account for the diversity in terms of a limited set of variants (see PRINCIPLES AND PARAMETERS THEORY), but such variants are not manifested in grammars in any straightforward way, and the whole attempt does not appear successful to many dispassionate observers (Newmeyer 2004). The reality is that there is an extraordinary diversity of linguistic types, in which both shared patterns and differences seem best understood historically and geographically (see, e.g., Haspelmath et al. 2005).

With the waning of hopes for straightforward grammatical universals, the case for pragmatic universals looks, in contrast, stronger and stronger. The distinct possibility now arises that while grammatical patterns are in large part a matter of historical and cultural evolution, principles of language usage constitute the foundational infrastructure for language, to which commonalities across languages can be partially attributed. This inverts the traditional view (as in Hymes 1982) that grammar is universal and language usage variable. If this inverted picture is even partially correct, then we would expect significant absolute (unconditional) universals across the subdomains of pragmatics (see ABSOLUTE AND STATISTICAL UNIVERSALS). The following sections lay out the case for pragmatic universals.

Deixis

The fundamental use of language is in face-to-face conversation, where participants take turns at speaking. Aspects of this context are built into languages in many detailed ways. All spoken languages have a grammatical category of **PERSON**, that is, a grammatical reflection of the different roles that participants (and nonparticipants) have in an utterance (speaker, addressee, third party), which is likely to be reflected in personal pronouns, verbal inflections, imperatives, vocatives (as in address forms), and so forth. Likewise, all languages have at least one demonstrative, a special form for indicating entities in the context - typically, there are contrastive forms (like *this* and *that*) associated with pointing. They also have ways to distinguish the time and place of speaking (they may not have TENSE, but they will have forms denoting "now," "today," "here," etc.). These aspects of language structure are pragmatic in the sense that they refer to aspects of the context of utterance, and their interpretation is relative to that context. The peculiarity of these systems is that as speakers alternate, the reference of these terms also alternates (my *I* is your *you*, and my *this* may be your *that*), a fact that children can find difficult when learning a language. Since artificial languages (logics, programming languages) successfully purge their structures of such items, it is clear that

natural languages could be different and, thus, that deictic organization constitutes a nontrivial universal aspect of language built for interactive use.

Presupposition

Languages have various ways to foreground and background information, and this is crucial if the speaker's current point is to be identified. Information that is presumed in the context (either because it has already been mentioned or is taken for granted) is typically not asserted but presupposed, and this is reflected in language structure. The contrast between definite and indefinite articles, in those languages that have them, is a simple example: Both *The ninth planet has a peculiar orbit* and *The ninth planet does not have a peculiar orbit* presuppose that there is a ninth planet. This constancy under negation is often taken to be a denning property of presupposition - it shows that the presupposed content is not what is being asserted. Note that unlike what is asserted, presuppositions are defeasible (fall away) in certain contexts, as in *If there is one, the ninth planet must have a peculiar orbit*. Many structures have been identified that signal this presuppositional property: factive verbs like *regret* in *he regrets publishing it* (which presupposes he did publish it), cleft-sentences like *It was the police who hid the crime* (which presupposes that someone hid the crime), or comparatives like *He's a better golfer than Tiger* (which presupposes that Tiger is a golfer). Although this might seem to be purely a matter of the arbitrary conventions of a single language, in fact structures with similar semantics also tend to carry similar presuppositions in other unrelated languages (Levinson and Annamalai 1992), suggesting that it is properties of the semantic representation that trigger the presuppositional inferences. It is thus possible to make an inventory of types of structure that tend to universally signal presuppositional content.

Implicature

A conversational implicature is an inference that comes about by virtue of background assumptions about language use, interacting closely with the form of what has been said. H. Paul Grice (1975, 1989) outlined a **COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE** instantiated in four such background "maxims" of use: Speak the truth (*quality*), provide enough but not too much information (*quantity*), be relevant (*relevance*), and be perspicuous (*manner*). For example, if A says "Have you seen Henk?" and B says "His office door is open," we read B's utterance as a partial answer (by relevance), which B chooses because he hasn't seen Henk but wishes to provide information that is both true (quality) and relevant, and sufficient to be useful (quantity) and clear enough (manner). By virtue of the assumption that B is following these maxims, B's utterance can suggest, or *conversationally implicate*, in Grice's terminology, that Henk is somewhere close by. Despite the fact that we often have reasons or cultural conventions for being obscure or economical with the truth (Sacks 1975; Ochs 1976), such indirect answers seem to be universal, suggesting that the background assumption of cooperation holds right across the cultures of the world.

The maxims of quantity and manner, in particular, seem to be responsible for detailed cross-linguistic patterns of inference (Horn 1984; Levinson 2000). For example, "the coffee is warm" suggests that it is not hot, or "Ibn Saud had 22 wives" suggests that he did not have 23 - even though if coffee is hot it is certainly warm, and if you have 23 wives you certainly have 22. The reasoning seems to be that if you know the stronger quantity holds, you should have said so - not saying so implicates that it does not hold. In a similar cross-linguistically general way, "It's not impossible that the war will still be won" implicates greater pessimism that the war will be won than the logically equivalent "It's possible the war will still be won." The reasoning seems to be that since the speaker has avoided the positive by using a double negative, by the maxim of manner he must have had some reason to do so. These cross-linguistic patterns seem to have systematic effects on grammar and lexicon (Levinson 2000; Sperber and Wilson 1995).

Speech-Acts

The speech acts of questioning, requesting, and stating are found in conversation in any language, and they have grammatical repercussions in all language systems - for example, in interrogative, imperative, and declarative syntax (Sadock and Zwicky 1985). Languages differ, of course, in how, and the extent to which, these acts are grammatically coded, but they always are at least partially reflected in grammar. John Searle (1976) suggested that there are five major kinds of speech-acts: directives (a class including questions and requests), representatives (including statements), commissives (promising, threatening, offering), expressives (thanking, apologizing, congratulating, etc.), and declarations (declaring war, christening, firing, excommunicating, etc.). The types are individuated by different preconditions and intended effects, known as their **FELICITY CONDITIONS**. The broad taxonomy offers plausible universal classes, while subsuming culture-specific actions like declarations, such as divorce by announcement in Moslem societies or magical spells in a Melanesian society.

Despite the fact that there is an association between, for example, interrogative form and questioning, the link between form and action performed is often complex. In English, for example, requests are rarely done in the imperative, but typically in the interrogative, as in "Can you help me get this suitcase down?" It has been noticed that if a distinctive felicity condition for a successful request is stated or requested, this will itself serve as a request (the addressee being able to get the suitcase down being a precondition to a felicitous request). This seems to have general cross-linguistic application, suggesting that the action performed is in fact implicated by what is said (Brown and Levinson 1987, 136 ff). However, in many cases, less regular strategies link what is said to the actions performed, and the mapping from utterances to actions remains a serious theoretical problem in pragmatics.

Conversation Structure

The organization of conversation seems likely to provide some of the most robust pragmatic universals. As far as we know, in all societies the most informal type of talk involves rapid

alternation of speaking roles (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). This turn-taking, of course, motivates the deictic system already mentioned. Such informal talk is also characterized by the immediacy of **CONVERSATIONAL REPAIR**; that is, if addressees do not hear or understand what is said, they may query either the whole or part, getting immediate feedback in the next turn (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). Such talk is structured locally in terms of sequences (Schegloff 2006) - in the simplest case, **ADJACENCY PAIRS**, that is, pairs of utterances performing actions like question-answer, offer-acceptance, request-compliance, greeting-greeting, and so forth. Sequences can be embedded, as in A: "Do you have Marlboros?" B: "You want 20s?" A: "Yes." B: "Ah sorry, no. We do have 10s." They can also be extended over more turns, for example by adding a "presequence" as in: A: "Do you mind if I ask you something?" B: "No." A: "Why did you give up that amazing job?" B: "Burnout." Given the general expectation for rapid turn-taking, any participant wishing to have an extended turn at talk is likely to negotiate this, for example, through a prestory of the kind "Have you heard what happened to Bonny?" During such an extended turn at talk, feedback of restricted types (*mmhm*, *uhuh*, etc.) may be expected. In addition to these local levels of organization, conversations also generally have overall structures - for example, they are likely to be initiated by greetings and ended with partings, each with its distinctive structure.

All of this detailed structure seems entirely general across cultures and languages, although there may be constraints of many local kinds about who can talk to whom and where in this informal way. Ethnographic reports to the contrary do not seem to stand the test of close examination. There are, though, many aspects of cultural patterning that can be very distinctive. For example, although in all cultures conversation makes use of multimodal signals (gaze, gesture, facial expression, etc.) in face-to-face interaction, the details can differ strikingly, whereas Tzeltal speakers avoid gaze and the signals that would be thus made available, Ross-el Islanders presume mutual gaze and so can systematically signal responses like "yes," "no," "amazing!" and so on by facial expression.

In addition to these general observations about conversational universals, there seem to be very detailed generalizations about specific actions. For instance, in a wide sample of languages, it seems that reference to persons follows a precise set of expectations about the form of reference expressions, as well as the procedures to follow when the expression proves inadequate (Stivers and Enfield 2007). Thus, utterances of the following kind, where specific components are added incrementally and in order until recognition is signaled, can be expected in any language: "John (.) Wilkins (.) The man you met at the party."

Human Ethology and Communication

Human language is unique in the animal world by virtue of its complex internal structure, its potential displacement across modalities (as in **SIGN LANGUAGES**), and its wide range of functions. It is also the only animal communication system that exhibits great diversity in structure and meaning across social groups. This diversity shows that it is heavily interdependent with historical and cultural processes. Nevertheless, all normal

children learn a language and use it in strikingly parallel ways. The strong universals of use suggest that language, in fact, rides on a rich, language-independent infrastructure. A crucial element is the ability to infer intentions from actions. Grice (1957) outlined a psychological theory of "non-natural meaning" or communication along the following lines: A communicator intends to cause an effect in an addressee by producing an action or utterance that is designed to cause that effect just by having that intention recognized (see **COMMUNICATIVE INTENTION**). Consider a nonverbal signal: A mother makes as if to smooth her own hair, thereby signaling to her daughter in a school concert that the daughter's hair is in disarray - if the child recognizes her intent, communication has succeeded. No conventional symbols are necessarily involved. Such a mode of communication, which can be observed in nonconventional sign languages like *home-sign* (Goldin-Meadow 2003), relies on some form of reciprocal "mind-reading" abilities (Levinson 2006). It plausibly forms the basis for the learning of language, as communication is evident in infancy (e.g., through pointing) prior to language acquisition (see **COMMUNICATION, PRELINGUISTIC**).

If a mind-reading ability is part of the infrastructure for language, there are also other aspects of the pragmatic infrastructure that are potentially independent of linguistic communication. For example, systematic turn-taking is discernible in infant-caretaker interaction long before verbal interchange is possible. Similarly, the use of gesture, facial expression, gaze, and posture in interaction appears early in child development. All of this points to a large raft of abilities and inherited dispositions that makes language use possible in the form that we know it. It is this infrastructure that infants use to bootstrap themselves into language. What is now observable in ontogeny was no doubt true also in phylogeny - for this infrastructure no doubt preceded the evolutionary specializations in anatomy and brain that now drive language (Enfield and Levinson 2006).

There are yet other universals of language use that are reflections of a common human ethology. We are one of the few species that shows evidence of cooperative instincts that are not based on kin selection. This cooperation is made possible by the subtle linguistic and paralinguistic expression of solidarity, dominance, and the juggling for position (see **PARALANGUAGE**), much of this explored by pragmaticists under the rubric of **POLITENESS** (Brown and Levinson 1987). Again, there seem to be systematic universals here, both in the underlying dimensions expressed (e.g., power, solidarity, degree of imposition) and in the basic strategies used to express them (e.g., modulations of deference or camaraderie).

In sum, then, an understanding of universals in pragmatics promises to give us deep insights into the infrastructure that lies behind human communication and the language that is so distinctive of it. This infrastructure is arguably what lies behind the development of language in infancy, as well as the evolution of language in the species. Taken as a core part of human ethology, it also tells us much about human nature and how it came to be the way it is.

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