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(**Major**) Sciences of Language (**Module**) Pragmatics

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**Aspects of Everyday language**

**Outcomes of the Tutorial** : *By the end of this tutorial, you will be able to :*

1. Distinguish between the distinctive features of everyday discourse.

2. Differentiate between what is said and what is meant.

3. Infer what is said in order to arrive at an interpretation the speaker’s intended meaning

3. Make students aware of the contextual factors governing language in use.

**Terminology Used in This Tutorial** :

Context, appropriateness, inference, non-literal meaning, reflexivity, indeterminacy, relevance, accommodation

**Aspects of Everyday Language**

In this lecture we are going to discuss some of the features of everyday language which are important in pragmatics.

**I. Appropriateness**

Consider the following situations:

1. Two colleagues, a female and a male standing in the university corridor when a stranger female student approached and asked the female colleague:

*Where's the lady room?*

What conclusions can you make from this utterance? In fact, we can make the following conclusions:

1. The speaker judged the "ladies' room" the most appropriate formula.
2. She thought it appropriate to address her request to a female rather than a male.
3. Directing her request to just one rather than both seems to encode an awareness of gender.

2. A lecturer was standing by the porter's office dressed in similar navy blue trousers and a pullover similar to the porter' uniform, when a female student walked up to him and asked:

*You're not the porter, are you?*

Obviously, we don't say this to a lecturer. But the speaker could hardly stand around waiting for the porter, while judging by the way he was dressed, he might be the person she was looking for.

3. A senior teacher during the start of a meeting says:

*Are we all here?*

He could see that they were not all there; this utterance had the effect of causing a younger member to get up and go for a missing colleague hunt.

4. A Lecturer who wants to call for his students' attention might loudly say:

*Right shall we begin?*

In fact, this is the most appropriate way in this context. But if a lecturer begins like this:

*May I speak English?*

This always causes a moment of consternation when the students think their lecturer might have lost the plot. Of course, this is not the appropriate way to start a pragmatics lecture. But, if the lecturer explains that this utterance is used in a shop in Italy all the meaning changes.

5. The law in Britain requires anyone selling alcohol to make sure that they sell it only to an adult, which they usually check with the formula:

*Are you over twenty one?*

Technically, an adult in Britain is anyone over eighteen, but the less confrontational formula *'Are you over twenty* one' is felt more appropriate because it allows answers like *No, but I am over eighteen* or *I'm nineteen actually* and not the just the bald yes or no required by *'Are you eighteen'*

We cite these examples because they are immediately recognizable as appropriate ways of using language to get business done. One of the features of language use that is of interest to pragmaticists is its appropriateness in relation to those who use it and those they address.

2.**Non-literal or indirect meaning**

As well as being appropriate to the contexts in which they occurred, many of the utterances in the previous section were also indirect in the sense that their literal meanings were not all the speakers intended to convey. So,

*Are we all here*? and *Shall we begin?*

Both purport to be questions in terms of the forms in which they are expressed yet, both are clearly intended to have other functions. None would take them as real questions and replied with a negative rejoinder. However, sometimes the indirectness is more subtle than this, so that it takes a bit of working out to realize that

*Randion removes dirt AND odours*

It is an indirect way of saying that other washing powders are good at getting the dirt out but leave your clothes smelling bad. And when the BBC referred to:

The campaign group called the Freedom Association

Listeners had to do quite a lot of work to come to the conclusion that the BBC was indicating that it did not necessarily share the philosophy of the Freedom Association and that the name 'Freedom Association' might have a false impression

So, we see that indirectness too is typical of real-world language use, and that literal or stated meaning is only one aspect of the meaning conveyed in an utterance – and not always the most important one.

**3. Inference**

One question worth asking is how we get from a string of words that appear to have a literal meaning. A head of Department showed Mr. Peter a draft of letter he had written to the Dean. The draft contained the sentence: Meanwhile, Mr. Peter has just told me of his long conversation with you earlier today. Mr. Peter asked for 'long' to be removed because 'long conversation' which is the literal meaning may be interpreted as disagreement. We obviously have to draw inferences or come to conclusions as to what the speaker is intending to convey. So, although we are not told that other washing powders leave our clothes smelling bad, we can work out that this is a conclusion we are meant to draw the stress on 'AND' in

*Randion removes dirt AND odours*

In the same way 'called' in: The campaign group called Freedom Association triggers an inference. *'called*' is telling us something about the title 'the Freedom Association', and so we infer that it may be slightly suspect.

This suggests that communication is not merely a matter of a speaker encoding a thought in language and sending it as spoken or signed message through space, or as a written message on paper, to a receiver who decodes it. This is clearly insufficient – the receiver must not only decode what is received but also draw an inference as to what is conveyed beyond what is stated.

Sometimes this inference is quite dramatic and much more interesting than the literal meaning itself, as when a female colleague says: *‘I'm a man’*. In this utterance, there is a hidden meaning that she intends us to infer. Or the comment made by the BBC theatre critic about the opening night of a new musical

*I looked at my watch after two hours and realized that only twenty minutes had passed*

**4. Indeterminacy**

Regarding meanings as matters of inference has one important consequence. It implies that the utterances we hear are in some ways unclear, or, as linguists sometimes say, under-determined. By this, we mean that an utterance might typically have one of several possible meanings and that the inference we draw determine which of these possible meanings is the one the addressee thinks the speaker in intending. In the previous section, we gave the example of 'I'm a man' .We clearly need to draw an inference in order to determine which of several different possible understandings the right one is. Sometimes the problem is to do with determining which word in a two-word phrase is the head word, so that although a *child* *actor* is a child who acts, the meaning of a *child psychiatrist* cannot be determined by analogy. Similarly, *in additive free*, the headword is "free", whereas in *50% extra free*,50% extra is head. Typically, the context can help us to determine the meaning. When most people say

*'I've just finished a book’.* Knowing the speaker will help us to determine what is meant. Has he/she finished reading or writing it?

**5.Context**

We have just discussed how context can help in determining the meaning of an utterance. Another way to think through this issue is to think of all the contexts in which you might utter the same words. Take the case of the utterance: *‘I'm tired’* this utterance could be interpreted differently in different contexts. If said late at night, it may count as an excuse to go to bed.But if it is said when the alarm clock goes off next morning, it probably means that I do not want to get out of bed. Or, *'Have you got a plastic bag?*’.Can you guess the context*?*

Because pragmaticists are interested in the meaning of utterances, they are also interested in the contexts in which utterances occur, since, as we have seen, these contexts help us to determine the meaning of what is said or the intended meaning. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous lecture, context can be divided into physical (spatio-temporal),linguistic, and background knowledge.

**6.Relevance**

We know that relevance is important to understanding because there are mechanisms which enable us to check that we have achieved the most relevant understanding. For example shortly after half term in my son's first term at secondary school, he said one day:

I'm enjoying school much more now. What did he mean?

Relevance has been seen by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) as the most important principle in, accounting for the way we understand language. Since we take every utterance as relevant, we understand utterances in whatever way will make them as relevant as possible. Thus for weeks there was a broken chair in the corridor at work with a notice pinned to it which said

Sit down with care

Legs can come off

**7.Accomodation**

As we try to determine what people mean by what they say, we usually need to accept, or accommodate good deal of information which we feel is known to the speaker and ourselves. This background knowledge or accommodation is essential to making sense of exchanges.

**8.Reflexivity**

Frequently one part of what we say provides some sort of comment on how our utterance fits into the discourse as a whole and how the speaker wants to be understood. Notice the use of therefore in

There must therefore be a very good case for not flowing anyone to proceed to Year 3.

This tells the reader how this sentence relates to the one(s) before.

At the beginning of one academic year I saw two first- year students in conversation in the corridor. One was listing the courses she was taking. She mentioned courses with the conventional titles like *Introduction to logic*, and then said

And er is it knowledge and reality

The then American president, Bill Clinton statement of 18 August 1998 contained the following sentence:

Indeed, I did have a relationship with Ms Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong

Notice the use 'indeed' and 'in fact' showed Clinton's commitment to the truth of what he is saying, as does the emphatic use of 'did' Clinton simultaneously tells us something (that he had a relationship) comments on what he tells us (that it was wrong) and assures the veracity (the function of in fact)

When speakers advice us of how they want us to take what they say, they make the task of understanding easier. This is why reflexive use of language is so common.