An Exploration Into the Mechanisms of How Do We Communicate With Words: A Review of *Pragmatics*

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Abstract

Levinson's *Pragmatics* (2003) is one of the classic monographs in pragmatics. By elaborating on the main ideas as well as the new developments of those core topics in pragmatics like deixis, conversational implicature, presupposition, speech acts and so on, the book provides readers with rich information in the field. Seeing its theoretical value, the present paper intends to review the main contents of the book and then make brief comments on it.

Key words: Pragmatics; Deixis; Implicature; Presupposition; Speech acts

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, the study of language in use, is a discipline that can help us better understand how do we communicate within a culture or even across cultures. Today, pragmatics has become one of the most vibrant and rapidly growing fields in linguistics and the philosophy of language (Huang, 2012, p.2), and it has gained a lot of insights from other disciplines such as cognitive science, artificial intelligence, informatics, neuroscience, language pathology, anthropology, sociology, and so on. However, tracing back into its history, there is one book that we cannot afford to neglect, i.e. Levinson's work in the field of Pragmatics, since it is this book that has systematized the field of pragmatics and made it a legitimate linguistic discipline in its own right. Initially published in 1980s (Levinson, 1983), the book was introduced into China around 20 years later (Levinson, 2003). As such a landmark book in pragmatics, what kind of linguistic and philosophical tradition does Levinson's *Pragmatics* (2003) follow, what kind of topics are included and discussed in it, and what new developments in these topics are briefed, are some of the key questions that an academic reader may ask. Having these questions in mind, in the following the paper shall examine the main contents of the book and make some comments on it.

1. THE MAIN CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

Following the Anglo-American linguistic and philosophical tradition that mainly builds on philosophical approaches to language rather than the continental tradition which is altogether broader, and would include much that also goes under the rubric of sociolinguistics, the book treats pragmatics in a more restricted way and deals with the topics that are central to the Anglo-American tradition of work in pragmatics. The main topics discussed here include deixis, conversational implicature, presupposition, speech acts and conversational structure. The book is composed of seven chapters. Except the first and the last chapter, all the rest chapters are devoted to each of the topics that have just been mentioned.

2. CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One "The scope of pragmatics" mainly discusses the origin of the term *pragmatics*, its alternative definitions as well as its current interests. Regarding its origin, the author points out that the modern usage of the term pragmatics derives from the trichotomy of semiotics made by the philosopher Charles Morris. According to Morris, there are three distinct branches of inquiry in semiotics (the science of signs): Syntactics (or syntax), being the study of "the formal relation of signs to one another", semantics, the study of "the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable" (their designata), and pragmatics, the study of "the relation of signs to interpreters" (Levinson, 2003, p.1). As for the definition of pragmatics, realizing that it is by no means easy to provide a definition that will cover all the scopes the practitioners of pragmatics actually do, the author instead offers a number of possible definitions. For example, the definitions given include "pragmatics is the study of those principles that will account for why a certain set of sentences are anomalous, or not possible utterances" (Ibid, p.6), "pragmatics is the study of language from a functional perspective, that is, that it attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes" (Ibid., p.7), "pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticality, or encoded in the structure of a language" (Ibid., p.9), and "pragmatics is 'meaning minus semantics'" (Ibid., p.28), and so on and so forth. Although each of these definitions has their own limitations or drawbacks, they on the whole sketch the sorts of concerns and boundary issues with which pragmaticists are implicitly concerned.

3. CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two deals with "deixis". According to Levinson, the term deixis is borrowed from the Greek word for pointing or indicating. Exemplars of deixis include the use of demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs and a variety of other grammatical features that are tied directly to the circumstances of utterance. Fundamentally, deixis is concerned with the way in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterance or speech event，and with the way in which the interpretation of utterances depends on the analysis of that context of utterance. There are two approaches to deixis: one is philosophical approach, and the other is descriptive approach. Philosophical interest in deixis partly comes from the questions of whether all indexical expressions can be reduced to a single primary one, and whether this final pragmatic residue can be translated out into some eternal context-free artificial language. Although there are different philosophical approaches to deixis, none of them

can fully deal with the complexity and variety of deictic expressions that occur in natural language. Alternatively, we can turn to the linguistically descriptive approach which can provide a relatively clearer picture of the types and the interrelations of deictic expressions, though adequate theories and frameworks are still lacking. Descriptive approach to deixis identifies five basic categories of deictic expressions: person, place, time, discourse (text) and social deixis. Various examples discussed here have illustrated that there are overlapping organizations of the five basic categories of deixis: Greetings usually involve temporal, person and discourse deixis; demonstratives both space and person; vocatives both person and social deixis; and so on. For example, while "good morning" can only be used as a greeting, "good night" can only be used as a parting. This case clearly indicates the interaction between time deixis and discourse deixis.

4. CHAPTER THREE

Chapter Three is mainly concerned with Grice's theory of conversational implicature and its revisions, problems as well as applications. According to Levinson, the notion implicature (the short form for conversational implicature) has at least five contributions: First, it offers significant functional explanations for some linguistic facts; second, it provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually "said" (i.e. more than what is literally expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered); third, it is likely to effect substantial simplifications in both the structure and the content of semantic descriptions; fourth, it seems essential for accounting properly for various basic facts about language, for example, for accounting for the meaning specification of particles like *well*, *anyway*, *by the way*, etc.; fifth, the few basic principles that generate implicatures can provide explanations for a large array of apparently unrelated facts. For example, explanations will be given for "Moore's paradox", how metaphors work and why tautologies like *War is war* can convey certain conceptual import.

Now that implicature has so many contributions, then what on earth is implicature? In fact, the notion implicature is developed from Grice's 'co-operative principle' which is essentially a theory about how people use language in conversation. Co-operative principle is composed of four basic maxims which are served as guidelines for conversations to be conducted in a maximally efficient, rational and co-operative way. The four basic maxims, namely, the maxim of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner specify what participants have to do in order to be co-operative in their use of language. In other words, speakers are supposed to talk sincerely, relevantly and clearly while providing sufficient information. However, in most ordinary types

of conversation, people just do not follow these guidelines to the letter. Rather, principles often have to be assumed (by hearers) to be adhered to at some deeper levels in cases that conversations seem not proceed co-operatively on the superficial level. It is in this kind of cases that inferences will arise to preserve the assumption of co-operation; and such inference is what Grice dubs a *conversational implicature*.

In contrast with terms like *logical implication*, *entailment* and *logical consequence* which are generally used to refer to inferences that derive solely from logical or semantic content, conversational implicatures are based on both the content of what has been said and some specific assumptions about the co-operative nature of ordinary verbal interaction (Levinson, 2003, p.104). There are at least two distinct ways through which inferences may come about: one is where the speaker is observing the maxims straightforwardly, the other is where the speaker deliberately and ostentatiously breaches or flouts the maxims. Grice distinguishes five characteristic properties of implicature, namely, cancellability (or more exactly, defeasibility), non-detachability, calculability, non-conventionality and indeterminacy.

5. CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Four deals with another pragmatic inference, namely, presupposition. Different from its ordinary language notion of presupposition to describe any kind of background assumption, the term presupposition here is only restricted to certain pragmatic inferences or assumptions in its technical sense that seem at least to be built into linguistic expressions and which can be isolated using specific linguistic tests (especially, constancy under negation). Concerns with presupposition in pragmatics also originate from debates in philosophy, especially debates about the nature of reference and referring expressions. The first philosopher in recent times to wrestle with such problems was Frege, the architect of modern logic, and was then followed by other philosophers like Russell and Strawson. Frege (1892) raised many of the issues that later became central to the discussions of presupposition. One of such problems is how to account for the fact that sentences that lacked proper referents like *The King of France is wise* could be meaningful. Frege himself offered an answer by distinguishing between sense and reference: Such sentences retain their sense or meaning even if they lack referents and thus fail to have a truth value (Levinson 2003, p.170). Pointing out that Frege's view led to anomalies, Russell (1905) proposed his well-known *theory of descriptions* which by decomposing statements like *The F is G* into a conjunction of three assertions, has the advantage of *scope-ambiguities*: negation either occurs with wide scope or with narrow scope. For example, with the wide-scope negation, one can use something like *The King of France is not wise* to deny

that the King of France exists, while with the narrow-scope, one can use a statement like *The King of France is not wise — because there is no such person* to deny that the predicate applies to him. Russell's analysis remained unchallenged until Strawson (1950) who found a crucial problem with Russell's analysis, i.e. the non-distinction between sentences and the use of sentences to make statements. Strawson argued that *sentences* aren't true or false, only *statements* are (as see Levinson, 2003, p.172). Then Strawson was led to claim that there is a special kind of relationship between *The King of France Is Not Wise* and *There Is A Present King of France*. He called this relation *presupposition*, and held that it was a special pragmatic inference which is distinct from logical implication or entailment.

While logical implications seem to be more difficult to work out, since it involves deeper logical reasoning, presuppositions of sentences seem to be easier to identify, since in sentences there are often particular words served to generate presuppositions. Levinson calls such presupposition-generating linguistic items presupposition-triggers.

Presupposition has the following distinguishing properties: One is that they are defeasible in (a) certain discourse contexts, (b) certain intra-sentential contexts; they are apparently tied to particular aspects of surface structure (Levinson, 2003, p.186). In addition, presupposition has another problematic property, i.e., projection problem (Ibid., p.186).

6. CHAPTER FIVE

Like the previous two chapters, Chapter Five is focused on one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for, namely, speech acts. Speech acts also have its philosophical background. In the 1930s there flourished a doctrine of logical positivism, a central tenet of which was that unless a sentence can, at least in principle, be verified in terms of truth or falsity, it was strictly speaking meaningless. It is in this movement that the later Wittgenstein was actively attacking with the well known slogan "meaning is use" (1958) and his insistence that utterances are only explicable in relation to the activities, or language-game, in which they play a role (Levinson, 2003, p.227). In the same period, concerns with verifiability and distrust of the inaccuracies and vacuities of ordinary language were paramount (Ibid, p.227). It is against such background that Austin launched his theory of speech acts. There are strong parallels between the later Wittgenstein's emphasis on language usage and language-games and Austin's insistence that "the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (Austin, 1962, p.147). However, it seems that Austin has not been quite influenced by Wittgenstein's later work. Therefore Austin's theory can be treated as autonomous.

In his posthumously published sets of lectures *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin starts his discussion by demolishing the view of language that would place truth conditions as central to language understanding. He distinguishes two basic contrasting types of utterances: One is the peculiar and special sentences with peculiar syntactic and pragmatic properties, which he called performatives, and the other is the traditionally known statements, assertions and the like, which he called constatives. Although unlike constatives, performatives cannot be testified in terms of truth and falsity, they can go wrong, or to be "unhappy", or infelicitous as Austin put it. That is to say, performatives can be assessed in terms of felicity. Austin distinguishes three main categories of conditions which performatives must meet so as to be "happy", and he termed them felicity conditions.

What readers of *How To Do Things With Words* should be noted is that there is an internal evolution to Austin's argument. To speak more specifically, Austin makes two shifts in his discussion: First, there is a shift from the view that performative utterances are a special class of sentences, to the view that there is a general class of performative utterances that includes both explicit and implicit performatives. Second, there is a shift from the dichotomy performative/constatives to a general theory of illocutionary acts. It is easy to understand the shifts, especially the latter one. For example, the sentence *I state that I am alone responsible* is just a statement in the performative normal form (Levinson, 2003, p.235). Thus, Austin holds that the dichotomy between statements as truth-bearers, and performatives as action-performers, can no longer be maintained. The shifts then lead to Austin's claim that all utterances, in addition to meaning what they mean, perform specific actions or do things through having specific *forces* (Ibid, p.236). Austin isolates three kinds of acts that are simultaneously performed when one is saying something: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Speech acts proposed by Austin gave rise to a large amount of philosophical work, among which is Searle's influential systematization of Austin's work. Guided in general by his *principle of expressibility* which holds that "anything that can be meant can be said" (Searle, 2001), Searle identifies five basic kinds of action that one can perform in speaking. However, though Searle's typology seems an improvement on Austin's, it is still a disappointment since it is not even built in a systematic way on felicity conditions.

Since the speech act theory has been put forward, there are a lot of discussions on the relationship between it and syntactics and semantics. There are two opposing views towards this question: One is (irreducibility) Thesis, the other is Antithesis. Thesis holds that speech acts are irreducible to matters of truth and falsity, while the Antithesis argues that there is no need for a special theory of illocutionary force because the phenomena that taxed Austin are assimilable to standard theories of syntax and truth-conditional semantics. Due to its insurmountable difficulties on both the semantic and syntactic fronts, theorists have demonstrated that

Antithesis is untenable. The collapse of Antithesis naturally left Thesis unassailed, though not without its own problems. For example, one of the major problems for both Thesis and Antithesis is that constituted by the phenomena known as indirect speech acts. There are three approaches proposed to indirect speech acts, namely, the *literal force hypothesis*, idiom theory and inference theory. Nevertheless, these three theories have their own problems too, and this serves as a good reason to abandon literal force hypothesis and as a result an adequate pragmatic theory of speech act is still needed. The context-change theory is thus proposed as a candidate for such a pragmatic theory of speech acts.

7. CHAPTER SIX

Chapter Six is centered on the topic of conversational structure. The author first distinguishes between discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA), and concludes that since conversation is not a structural product in the same way that a sentence is, DA's methods and theoretical tools imported from mainstream theoretical linguistics seem quite inappropriate to the domain of conversation. What seems to be more appropriate for CA is a rigorously empirical approach which avoids premature theory construction, and an essentially inductive method which is used to search for recurring patterns across many records of naturally occurring conversations. Conversation analysis has been pioneered by a break-away group of sociologists known as ethnomethodologists who, being unsatisfied with quantitative techniques, and the arbitrary imposition on the data of supposedly objective categories that were typical of the mainstream American sociology, advocated "ethic" (participants' own) methods of production and interpretation of social interaction (Levinson, 2003, p.295), hence the term ethnomethodology. As a result, such a proposal in practice led to a strict and parsimonious structuralism and a theoretical asceticism — the emphasis is on the data and the patterns recurrently displayed therein (Ibid, p.295). Guided by such methodology, pragmaticians have made various findings including those in the areas of turn-taking, adjacency pairs, preferred organization, pre-sequences and etc.. Chapter Six is in fact devoted to the discussions on these findings as well as its applications.

8. CHAPTER SEVEN

Chapter Seven is the last chapter and also the concluding chapter, in which Levinson elaborates on the relationship between pragmatics and "core" linguistics, also the interrelationship between pragmatics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, and finally examines briefly the applications of pragmatics in other fields such as second language learning, man-machine interaction as well as the communication problems between humans speaking the same language.

CONCLUSION

In Summary, by discussing and commenting on the works made by many in the field of pragmatics, Levinson's book offers a general survey of what is pragmatics, what are the essential differences and correlations between pragmatics and other closely related subjects like semantics and syntactics, and what are the main ideas as well as new developments of those core topics that are usually included in pragmatics such as deixis, conversational implicature, presupposition, speech acts and so on. In recent years, pragmatics has received rich nutrition from different disciplines, which thus give rise to the emergence of many new branches in the field. According to Huang's work (2012, 2015), these branches fall into mainly two orientations: One is cognitively-oriented, which embraces cognitive pragmatics, psycho—or psycholinguistic pragmatics, computational pragmatics, clinical pragmatics neuropragmatics, and etc.; the other is socially/culturally- oriented pragmatics, which includes socio— (or societal) pragmatics, cultural pragmatics (also known as anthropological/ethnographic pragmatics), cross/inter- cultural pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, and so on. Apart from the above two main orientations, there are other varieties which are hard to be categorized into either of the two main orientations — historic pragmatics, synchronic pragmatics, corpus pragmatics, literary pragmatics, legal pragmatics, feminist pragmatics are just some of them. In spite of these new developments, with its focus on those core topics like deixis, conversational implicature and etc., Levinson's work is still worth our reading, for it not only has systematized pragmatics as a discipline, but also paved the ground for understanding those later developments in the field. To conclude, by exploring deixis, conversational implicature, presupposition, speech acts and other key topics in pragmatics, Levinson has provided us with some insights into certain mechanisms concerning how do we communicate with words in and/or across (a) culture(s).

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