

-116-

PRAGMATIC PRINCIPLES  
AND  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Dr. SANA ABDEL AZIZ TAMMAM  
University College For Women  
Ein Shams University

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Dr. Sanaa A. Tammam

"Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words. A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intention".

(Miller, 1974)

In studying conversation, a distinction can be made between linguistic competence which is made up of grammatical competence (abstract decontextualised knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax and semantics etc.) and pragmatic competence (the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. This parallels Leech's (1983) division of linguistics into grammar (the decontextualised formal system of the language) and pragmatics (the use of language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer. Leech suggests that the semantics/pragmatics distinction can be equated, at least in part, with the distinction between

'sentence meaning' and 'speaker's meaning'. This point has been made and discussed by Bach and Harnish (1979), Wilson and Sperber (1979, 1981) who all argue that while the range of possible senses and references of an utterance is explicitly provided, by semantic rules, pragmatic principles are needed in order to:

- (a) assign sense and reference to the speaker's words.
- (b) assign force and value to the speaker's words.

As Corder (1981) has pointed out, almost all sentences are ambiguous when taken out of context, while instances of sentences being genuinely ambiguous in contexts are fewer. It's one's semantic knowledge which provides the range of possible meanings of ambiguous sentences such as:

1- i. She missed it

In which the verb 'miss' has at least three senses and 'she' and 'it' have indefinite number of possible referents.

Pragmatic principles particularly the Gricean maxim of relevance allow one to assign sense and reference to the utterance in context e.g. if it were uttered in reply to:

1- ii. Why didn't Jane come on the earlier train?

Pragmatic inferencing would allow one to determine that 'she' referred to Jane, 'it' to 'the earlier

train' and 'missed' had the sense 'failed to catch'.  
Whereas in reply to:

1- iii. How did Jane manage without a car?

'she' would refer to 'Jane', 'it' to 'the car'  
and 'missed' would have the sense 'felt the lack of'.

Pragmatic principles, too, would allow one to  
assign force to the utterance e.g. criticism or  
disapproval.

It follows, therefore, that the hearer would  
fail to perceive the speaker's communicative intent  
if, from the range of possible senses and references,  
the hearer chose that which the speaker had not  
intended, and, if the hearer failed to perceive the  
intended illocutionary force of the speaker's utterance.  
The following examples illustrate the point:

2- a. Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham  
please?

b. Don't worry, it's a big place, I don't think  
it is possible to miss it.

In this case the driver understood that A's  
utterance is a request for information but misunderstood  
the intended sense of 'when' while in this case:

3- a. Is this coffee sugared?

b. I don't think so, Does it taste as if it is?

B interprets A's utterance as a genuine request for information rather than as A intended a complaint, the intended effect of which was to elicit an apology or an offer to provide the sugar.

For an utterance to be pragmatically successful involves two types of judgements: On One level, the basically grammatical assessment of a linguistic token and on the other, judgements concerning the pragmatic force of that utterance in a particular social setting.

The two levels are, of course, closely linked and the hearer's failure (at level 1) to understand which proposition has been expressed may make it impossible for him to understand the intended illocutionary force (at level 2): e.g.

4- Lecturer : Have you seen Leo?

It was not clear, even in context, to decide whether he was using 'seen' in the sense of:

- (a) to set eyes on: in which case the force of an utterance would probably have been a request for information: where is Leo?
- (b) 'seen' in the sense of (spoken to), in which case the force would have been something between

criticism and a reproach for requiring an explanation or an apology (Have you spoken to Leo, as I have told you, and if not why not?).

Strictly speaking it would be logical to apply the term 'pragmatic failure' to misunderstandings which occur at either level one or level two, since both levels involve H in pragmatic inferencing but I reserve the term exclusively for misunderstandings which arise, not from the ability on the part of H to understand sense/reference of the speaker's words in the contexts in which they are uttered since they are relatively apparent in surface structure and can be judged according to prescriptive rules but from an inability to recognise the force of the speaker's utterance when the speaker intended that this particular hearer should recognise it.

Leech (1977), Brown and Levinson (1978) point out that the pragmatic force of an utterance is frequently ambivalent even in context, and often intentionally so. For reasons of politeness or expediency both speaker and hearer may deliberately exploit ambivalence.

".....the rhetoric of speech acts often encourages ambivalence. "Would you like to come in and sit down?" depending on the situation could be

an invitation, a request or a directive. Or more importantly, it could be deliberately poised on the uncertain boundary between all three. (Leech, 1977:99).

We can say then that "pragmatic failure" has occurred on any occasion on which H perceives the force of S's utterance as other than S intended he should perceive it. For example: if,

- (a) H perceives the force of S's utterance as stronger or weaker than S intended he should perceive it.
- (b) H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence.
- (c) S expects H to be able to infer the force of his utterance but is relying on a system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not in fact share.

In this paper however, we argue that for those engaged in the teaching of English to people from other cultures, pragmatic failure raises issues which make it essential to distinguish two types of pragmatic failure here:

- i. Pragma-linguistic failure which occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of TL.

ii. Socio-pragmatic failure: A term we have appropriated from Leech (1983:10-11) which we use here to refer to the S's failure to understand the social conditions placed on Language in use : i.e.

a) The communicative intent of an utterance: speech act, and,

b) The attitude of the S towards the hearer (the degree of social distance, relative power, rights, duties ..... etc).

As one moves from a to b one moves from what is language-specific to what is culture-specific. Pragma-Linguistic failure is basically a linguistic problem caused by difference in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, while socio-pragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perception of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. It is this latter type that we shall concentrate on.

It pragmatic expectations and assessment are indeed culture-specific, it is likely that a foreign S will assess size of imposition, social distance ... etc differently from a native speaker.

#### (1) The Sample

In this paper we shall demonstrate that language learners may fail to interpret a text, not because

they lack the necessary linguistic knowledge or because they lack the requisite knowledge of the world but because of a cross-cultural conflict of values and beliefs between the students and what the author intends to convey. If this is so with a literary text, it might also be true at times in ordinary human interaction.

Twelve students were presented with the opening dialogue in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and asked to write their comments on it. These students, at the time, had just been out of secondary schools where they had been taught very little literature, but with a knowledge of English sufficient to have overcome an entrance examination, and to be accepted by a university English department. Their answers revealed that though they seem to have understood the semantics of sentences, they had misinterpreted the utterances and consequently formed a mistaken impression of the two characters of Mr and Mrs Bennet and of the relationship between them.

(2) Model of Analysis:

I shall use the conversational rules proposed by Grice and apply them to the dialogue. Grice's principles can be expressed as follows:

The cooperative principle

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged,

Maxim of Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true specifically:

- a. do not say what you believe to be false.
- b. do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Quantity

- a. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
- b. do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Relevance

Make your contribution relevant.

Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous and specifically:

- a. Avoid obscurity.
- b. Avoid ambiguity.
- c. Be brief.

around for a related but cooperative proposition that B might be intending to convey, we arrive at the opposite or negative of what he has stated, namely that there is nothing America can do. Hence, ironies arise. If there is no underlying assumption of cooperation, no irony would be drawn.

Levinson (1983) suggests that the exploitations or floutings, of different maxims could give rise to many of the traditional "figures of Speech".

"These inferences are based on the remarkable robustness of the assumption of cooperation: if someone drastically and dramatically deviates from maxim type behaviour, then his utterances are still read as underlyingly cooperative if this is at all possible" (1983: 109).

### (3) Analysis

The conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet opens with the following exchange:

My dear Mr. Bennet", said his lady to him one day, "Have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mrs. Bennet's question is intended not only as an inquiry whether Mr. Bennet has or has not heard the news but as an introduction to a topic which is

oriented to reach a certain end.

Mr Bennet replied that he had not.

Mr Bennet however, chooses to reply to the inquiry part of her question and totally ignored the topic.

"But it is", returned she, "for Mrs. Long has just been here and she told me all about it".

Mr Bennet made no answer.

By social standards, Mr Bennet's responses are clearly not sufficient. He is not saying enough. The maxim of Quantity is being broken, and the author makes this clear to the readers in Mrs. Bennet next remark and the manner in which it is uttered:

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

Mrs. Bennet is persistently proceeding with the topic forcing her husband to join into it.

Mr. Bennet deliberately breaks the maxim of Quantity again. The topic and the procedure are not new to him. So, he accepts the discussion resignedly and knowingly. This time by saying more than the situation requires:

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection

to hearing it".

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the North of England, that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately, that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week".

"What is his name?"

Mr. Bennet let go some of his resistance and begins to play up to her in what amounts as a game:

"Bingley"

Mr Bennet proceeds with the topic, hitting directly and knowingly at her intentions.

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh, single, my dear, to be sure. A single man of large fortune four or five thousands a year. What a fine thing for our girls".

In her turn Mrs. Bennet appears to break a maxim, the maxim of Relevance, in juxtaposing the wealth

of Mr. Bingley with the good fortune of their daughters. But she is in fact operating the cooperative principle in the ordinary way, here deliberately to set up an implicature. Mr. Bennet's response is to pretend not to recognise it as such:

"Hor so, how can it affect them?"

Forcing her to reach her maximus goal and to define shortly the conversational implicature:

"My dear Mr. Bennet", replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them".

She expects her husband to follow her use of Grice's maxims at their deeper level. He deliberately ignores the implicature underlying her utterance by questioning whether her inference is Mr. Bingley's intention:

"In this his design in settling here?"

Mr. Bennet seems to break the maxim of Quality here and by operating the cooperative principle he is setting up an implicature; namely that he knows that this is not Mr. Bingley's design in settling there, yet posing his ironical question mainly to imply her. Her response supports this:

"Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so. But

it is likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes".

"I see no occasion for that, you and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party".

Once again an implicature is generated by a flouting of the maxim of Quality. It should be now be quite clear to the reader that Mr. Bennet quite simply is failing to follow Grice's cooperative principle, and indeed he is acting consistently, in that it is not only in his speech that he fails to do so, but in his behaviour too. He refuses to visit Mr. Bingley, and maintains this position throughout the dialogue. Levinson points out that "Grice's maxims hold true for all behavioural cooperative exchanges" (1983-103).

On no level does Mr. Bennet appear to be cooperative, so that when he begins to flatter his wife with comments on her beauty, the reader must ask himself whether the maxim of Quality is being broken. Is he serious? Indeed, in what follows, it is difficult to take what Mr. Bennet says at its face

value. But Mrs. Bennet, despite all the earlier evidence to the contrary, continues to assume that each succeeding remark of her husband will follow Grice's overriding cooperative principle and keeps taking his remarks seriously. She responds earnestly to every suggestion and comment, however outlandish, and that includes his suggestion that Bingley might prefer her to any of her daughters:

"My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now, when a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty".

"In such cases, a woman has not much beauty to think of".

"But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighbourhood".

"It is more than I engage for, I assure you".

"But consider your daughters.. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him if you do not".

She speaks earnestly while he plays up to her

d. Be orderly.

(Levinson, 1983: 102).

These principles specify what people have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational cooperative way, but, as Levinson (1983) says, they do not mean that everyone speaks sincerely, relevantly and clearly all the time while providing information, but rather that people will interpret what one says as conforming to these maxims on at least some level, even if one is not strictly following them. Sometimes people do not follow a certain maxim in order to exploit it for some communicative purpose e.g.:

- a. What if Israel bombarded Egypt?
- b. Oh! come on, America rules the area.

The maxim of Quality requires the speaker to be sincere and true, yet any informant citizen knows that B's utterance is blatantly false. That being so, B cannot be trying to deceive A. The only way in which the assumption that B is cooperating can be maintained is if we take B to mean something rather different from what he actually said. Candlin (1981) has pointed out that a surface level lack of cooperation may conceal a deeper level cooperation, and that is simply what is happening in this case. Searching

ironically giving us the feeling that this conversation is not new, nor is his retort to his wife. His tone reveals the game he is playing which she misses all through in the reference to her beauty and finally in this reference:

"You are over scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls, though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy".

Again, Mrs. Bennet fails to realise her husband's deliberate breach of Grice's Maxim of Quantity and so persistently misses his ironical attitude and takes it earnestly all the time.

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others, and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her preference".

"They have none of them much to recommend them", replied he; "they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters".

He deliberately and ostentatiously breaks the maxim of Quality, this time to sober her down. Yet she is still blind to his uncooperative behaviour.

"Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? you take delight in vexing me, you have no compassion on my poor nerves".

"You mistake me, my dear, I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

"Ah, you do not know what I suffer".

"But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousands a year come into the neighbourhood".

This is a clear indication of the repetitive form of the conversation and a climax of irony, for it entails a comment on the failure of her past and future foolish expectations.

"It will be no use to us, if twenty such men should come, since you will not visit them".

"Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all".

It is Mrs. Bennet failure to see the implicatures

underlying her husband's speech that leads the reader to the conclusion that she is stupid and shallow; and Mr. Bennet's persistent uncooperative behaviour while maintaining a polite form of words that leads to an impression of wit and irony, but lack of genuine sympathy for his wife which is the outcome of her irrational past attempts to force him into similar situations.

#### (4) Results

What is interesting is that the 12 students asked to comment seem to see the conversation with the same eyes as Mrs. Bennet. They recognise that a family quarrel is in progress but only a minor one, because the irony in Mr. Bennet's attitude is missed. The questions to which they replied on paper did not focus on irony nor, of course on the ideas of Grice. They are:

- 1- This is the first conversation in *Pride and Prejudice* what it suggests will be the subject of the story. What light does it throw on the circumstances and family life of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet?.
- 2- Write a character sketch of Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Bennet.

The following quotations are taken from their replies with the focus in the first few extracts on

the relationship between the couple, remarks on Mr. Bennet follow and lastly, remarks on Mrs. Bennet. Quotations which are not directly relevant to the theme of this paper or some repetitions are not included.

- 1- I think their family life is not exactly happy.
- 2- It seems they have a happy marriage but Mr. Bennet is a bit absent-minded.
- 3- Mr. Bennet is proud of his wife but they sometimes have their disagreements.
- 4- Mr. Bennet seems to ignore his wife and her opinions of life though he is polite to her.
- 5- Mr. Bennet loves his wife but doesn't always listen to her or take notice of what she is telling him.
- 6- Mrs. Bennet seems to be talkative and domineering.
- 7- I guess she is the head of the family.
- 8- Mrs. Bennet is a determined person. She knows how to get what she wants.
- 9- Mrs. Bennet has had bad nerves and her husband does not understand her.
- 10- Mrs. Bennet likes her children very much and she wants them to be happy like her.

No attempt was made to follow up the students' replies with further questions so as to elicit reasons for their views. It remains then only to speculate on their partial lack of insight. It is possible

that lack of concentration was a contributory factor but since they were providing written answers, they had the opportunity to return repeatedly to the text. It remains possible that Grice's maxims are universally so deeply ingrained that, without training, readers are unable to discern when they are suspended. Alternately, conversational rules are culturally conditioned and not universal. So could it be that it is the student's own social background which contributes to such an impression? It was thought however, that it would be worth while presenting another group of students with the same conversation translated into the learners mother tongue and then compare responses. It was hoped that this could throw some light on the question of irony on one hand and on the general impression which the students seem to have formed; that Mrs. Bennet was talkative and shallow on the other.

When this was done with ten-student group who recently joined the English department, we got the following responses:

- 1- The two people are of different personalities.  
They always disagree about family affairs.
- 2- They have been married for twenty years and their family life is becoming boring.
- 3- Their relationship is not at all clear.

- 4- Mr. Bennet does not care about his daughters or their social behaviour.
- 5- Mr. Bennet does not approve of the way his wife wants to marry his daughters.
- 6- Mr. Bennet is not interested in his wife's nor in his neighbours.
- 7- Mr. Bennet is a kind and polite person.
- 8- Mrs. Bennet is taktive and materialistic.
- 9- Mrs. Bennet is very shallow and ignorant. She does not understand her husband.

#### (5) Conclusions

These two groups of responses indicate the learners' realisation of the disagreement between the two characters but they show variation in explaining the reasons for this disagreement. The first group of responses shows partial insight into the relationship between the couple as in 4 and 5, though they miss irony. While 6 as well as 1 record a correct insight into Mrs. Bennet's fictional character. Response 10, however, is of a very important significance.

The second group of responses is more articulate in explaining the reasons for this disagreement. Responses 1,4 and 6 show partial insight into this relationship, while 5 acquires the same significance as response 10 in the first group. It is very difficult

to assume that the learners who gave these two responses have missed irony.

Responses 8 and 9 show correct insight into the fictional character of Mrs. Bennet. The later being nearer to the point.

The resemblance between these two groups of responses accentuates the significance of the cultural aspect of pragmatics and answers our previous question about the importance of the learners' social background in interpreting texts which represent different values and cultural attitudes.

Jane Austen and Mr. Bennet are working against a deep rooted middle class Egyptian tradition and that explains partly why the note of irony adopted by both author and character are all together missed by students, and explains too, why the opposite point of view of Mrs. Bennet is endorsed. In the tradition referred to, happiness is equated with marriage, and marriage becomes an end and a goal of every unmarried woman. The role of a father and a mother is, therefore, evaluated according to what extent they provide or fail to provide conditions of marriage for their daughter, hence the importance of the answer we got in 10 in the first group, and response 4 in the second group. The unique departure from this tradition comes

only once in the second group, in response 5.

The students, therefore, have failed to interpret the situation not because they lack linguistic ability to understand the semantics of utterances, nor to perceive the force underlying them but because of cross-cultural difficulties and by so doing they were unable to perceive the relationship between the two main characters in the same way the author intended them to do. They may have been also misled by the level of superficial politeness exhibited in the test and by the use of terms of endearments. Polite usage in Arabic permits less elaborate expressions than English and more direct speech acts (except may be among intellectuals). Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1981:79) argue:

"Although the inventory of Speech acts and performing strategies may be basically the same across languages, two languages (i.e. Language-culture pairings) may differ significantly in terms of what you do and to whom".

#### (6) Pragmatics and Language Teaching

Pragmatic failure, then, is an important source of cross culture communication breakdown, but in spite of this, teachers and textbook writers alike have almost completely ignored it. It is not difficult

to understand why this would be so, and why they have suffered to remain on the more solid ground of grammar. Firstly, as Widdowson (1979:13) has pointed out, Pragmatic description has not yet reached the level of precision which grammar has attained in describing linguistic competence. Secondly, pragmatics -language in use- is a delicate area and it is not immediately obvious how it can be taught. Two points will be discussed here in this direction:

(1) Pragmatic principles, as already remarked, are not immediately apparent in the surface structure of utterances and can be revealed only by discussing with students what force they intend to convey. But first students must be given the tools to make such discussions possible. What I am proposing then is that teachers should develop a students' meta-pragmatic ability to analyse language use in a conscious manner -a process which Sharewood-Smith (1981: 152-3) terms "conscious-raising". This might be achieved in two ways:

a- By making them aware of Grice's pragmatic principles underlying utterances, and of the conventional implicatures attached to them generally so that when any of the maxims is flouted they can perceive the unconventional implicature being intended. Mastery of the

Gricean maxims would seem to be essential if the foreign learner is going to be able to understand English well and fit it socially when using it himself. This factor is essentially important as without it the confidence so important for linguistic performance likely to be undermined.

b- By discussing language use in the light of pragmatic parameters such as:

- position (role, status ... etc)
- properties (sex, age ... etc)
- relations (dominance, authority etc)

By making explicit to the learner the different principles which underlie pragmatic decision-making, we not only give the learner the knowledge or make an informed choice but also allowing him/her the freedom to flout pragmatic conventions in exactly the same way as the native speaker does.

c- By discussing drama to make pragmatic analysis explicit: As short (1981: 200). The discussion of what is meant, implied etc. by characters in dramatic dialogue can also be used in class to make students explicitly aware of the communicative nature of discourse

(2) Teachers need to alert their students to possible cross-cultural differences:

"It seems to be advisable for the teacher to explicitly point out to the learner that politeness markers are an integral part of the foreign cultural system and should neither be used nor interpreted by reference to the learner's native system". (House and Kasper 1981:184). Sensitizing learners to expect cross-cultural differences in the linguistic realisation of politeness, truthfulness ... etc makes the teaching of language truly educational. Such techniques, I would suggest are desirable pedagogically and politically. They help them to develop a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language and improve their appreciation of foreign texts especially literary texts.

We do great injustice, if we expect students simply to absorb pragmatic norms without explicit formalisation. The teaching of pragmatic appropriateness should not be left until complete grammatical competence has been attained. Once a student is exposed to the target culture, he rapidly acquires pragmatic competence.

Observations of adults who already speak fluent English, but never attained pragmatic competence make one think that pragmatic competence can never be simply

"grafted" on to "grammatical competence", and make one wonders whether there is not a point beyond which it is difficult to acquire different pragmatic norms.

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