Discourse and context (Pragmatics) - summary

(sources: Black 2006, Yule 1996)

*Definitions of pragmatics*

-Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning: it is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by the speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader).

-Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning: it deals with the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said.

-Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said: it explores how listeners can make inferences about what is said in order to arrive at an interpretation of the speaker’s intended meaning.

-Pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance: it examines the question of what determines the choice between the said and the unsaid, and so the distance between the people involved in the communication.

*Speech act theory*

-Locutionary act: the production of a well-formed utterance in whatever language we speak: “I’ve just made some coffee”.

-Illocutionary act: the meaning we wish to communicate (the illocutionary force we attach to a locutionary act is the meaning we intend to convey). We might utter the sentence above to make a statement, an offer, an explanation, or for some other communicative purpose.

-Perlocutionary act: the effect of our words (in the case of the sentence above: to account for a nice smell, or to get the hearer to drink some coffee).

Example of illocutionary force: in an utterance it is what it ‘counts as’. The sentence ‘I’ll see you later’ may count as:

1) a prediction

2) a promise

3) a warning

Speech acts classification - five types

1.Declarations

2. Representatives

3. Expressives

4. Directives

5. Commissives

*Politeness and notion of face*

Politeness refers to the idea of polite social behaviours, or etiquette, within a culture. Our wish to get our own way and maintain a satisfactory public self-image or ‘face’. Face thus indicates the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize.

Politeness in interaction: the means by which we show awareness of another person’s face (social distance / closeness, terms of respect or deference, friendliness, camaraderie, or solidarity).

Within their everyday social interactions, people generally behave as if their expectations concerning their public self-image, or their face wants will be respected.

-If a speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual’s expectations regarding self-image, it is described as *face threatening act* (FTA)

-Alternatively, given the possibility that some action might be interpreted as a threat to another’s face, the speaker can say something to lessen the possible threat and this is known as *face saving act* (FSA)

*Hedge*: “any linguistic device by which a speaker avoids being compromised by a statement that turns out to be wrong, a request that is not acceptable, and so on. Thus, instead of saying ‘This argument is convincing’, one might use a hedge and say ‘As far as I know this argument is convincing’; instead of giving an order ‘Carry it into the kitchen!’, one might use a hedge and say ‘Could you perhaps carry it into the kitchen?’ (CODL: 173)