

Communicative and pragmatic paradigm

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. Pragmatics encompasses speech act theory, conversational implicature, talk in interaction and other approaches to language behavior in philosophy, sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Unlike semantics, which examines meaning that is conventional or "coded" in a given language, pragmatics studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on structural and linguistic knowledge (e.g., grammar, lexicon, etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, any pre-existing knowledge about those involved, the inferred intent of the speaker, and other factors. In this respect, pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity, since meaning relies on the manner, place, time etc. of an utterance.

Most people working on linguistic meaning or communication assume that semantics and pragmatics are distinct domains, yet there is still little consensus on how the distinction is to be drawn. The position defended in this paper is that the semantics/pragmatics distinction holds between (context-invariant) encoded linguistic meaning and speaker meaning. Two other 'minimalist' positions on semantics are explored and found wanting: Kent Bach's view that there is a narrow semantic notion of context which is responsible for providing semantic values for a small number of indexicals, and Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore's view that semantics includes the provision of values for all indexicals, even though these depend on the speaker's communicative intentions. Finally, some implications are considered for the favoured semantics/pragmatics distinction of the fact that there are linguistic elements (lexical and syntactic) which do not contribute to truth-conditional content but rather provide guidance on pragmatic inference.