

Author's Accepted Manuscript. Chapter one of: Clark, Billy. In press. Pragmatics: The Basics. To be published by Routledge, 2021. This manuscript to be available via Pure 18 months after the book's publication (scheduled for August 2021).

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE VERY BASICS

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Abstract

This chapter discusses what pragmatics is and what it aims to explain. The term 'pragmatics' has been used in many ways and to cover a very wide range of things. This book focuses on pragmatics understood as being about how we work out (or 'infer') what to say, write, sign (in sign languages) and do when communicating and how we work out ('infer') what others are intending to communicate to us. The chapter briefly indicates some things which pragmatic theories have attempted to explain.

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pragmatic theories have attempted to explain. We begin to consider possible explanations in chapter two.

COMMUNICATING AND UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever misunderstood something? Or been misunderstood? Have you ever wondered why some interactions make you feel happy or frustrated? Maybe you notice that you always feel good after you've had a conversation with one friend and not so good after you've spoken to another? Or maybe that you sometimes annoy or offend somebody without meaning to? Have you ever noticed that some people have a knack for getting what they want from other people in everyday interactions or in workplace contexts? Or that things often go wrong for somebody else? Understanding these things usually involves some consideration of pragmatics. This is because pragmatics is about what we do when we communicate and how we respond to other people's communicative acts.

There are many approaches to pragmatics and they focus on a very wide range of topics. Pragmatics as understood in this book aims to account for how we produce and understand acts of verbal and nonverbal communication. Most current work on pragmatics developed from work on language and focused initially on how contextual factors affect the interpretation of linguistic utterances. In particular, they considered how we work out or '**infer**' meanings in specific contexts. Later work broadened the discussion to consider a wider range of aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication and to production and interaction as well as interpretation.

We infer, or 'make inferences', all the time. I made several today. I saw bright light in the window and inferred that it was a sunny day. I heard the letterbox open and close and inferred that the post had arrived. I saw an empty cereal packet and inferred the cereal was finished. And I made many more inferences as I went about my day.

We also make inferences when communicating. Here is an example to illustrate this (the part in italics represents some contextual information):

- (1) *A man (Adam) walks into a room where a TV is switched on. He picks up the remote and turns the TV off. He then turns around and sees a woman (Bella) sitting in an armchair.*

Bella: I was watching that!

What happens next? A reasonable guess is that Adam might turn the TV on again and (probably) apologise, maybe also saying something intended as an explanation (e.g. ‘*Sorry, I didn’t see you.*’)

How do we explain what happened in (1)? At first glance, this probably seems straightforward. Bella is upset that Adam turned the TV off and makes this clear by pointing out that she was watching it.

However, what I have just written does not explain things. It just describes them using different words. An explanation would need to tell us more about what both Adam and Bella did, including how they decided what to do and say and how they each understood what the other had said and done. A full account of what happened would involve a large number of things, including accounts of:

- (2)
- a. What Adam thought (and inferred) when he entered the room.
 - b. How Adam decided to turn off the TV.
 - c. What Bella thought when Adam turned the TV off.
 - d. How Bella decided what to say.
 - e. How Adam worked out what Bella intended.

If we stayed in the room, we'd have more to consider, including how Adam decides what to do next (e.g. realising his mistake and offering an explanation), and so on.

Pragmatics usually focuses on the last of these, i.e. on (2e). More specifically, it usually focuses on how Adam got from the linguistic meaning of what Bella said to an understanding of what she intended in this context, i.e. on how Bella's utterance led Adam to work out that Bella was saying (directly) that she was watching the TV programme and (indirectly) that she was upset that Adam had turned it off and that she would like it turned back on again. When we list what we need to explain, it's quite a long list. We might summarise by saying that it aims to explain how Adam recognises the following things (among others):

(4) Understanding *I was watching that*:

a. Linguistic form

I was watching that

b. Linguistic meaning

The person referred to as *I* was watching the thing referred to as *that* at some point before the time when she said it

c. Contextual assumptions

Bella is the speaker

Adam has turned off the TV in the room he just came into

Bella was sitting opposite the TV Adam turned off

d. Directly communicates

Bella was watching the programme which was showing on the TV which Adam has just turned off

e. Indirectly communicates

Bella is not happy about what Adam has done

Bella would like the TV turned on again

An account of how utterances are understood in this way has been at the core of pragmatics since it took off as an area of study in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

More recently, there has been increased focus on how we decide what to say or do when we produce communicative acts as well as on how we interpret them. There has also been increased interest in the notion that what is communicated involves communicators working together to 'co-create' or 'negotiate' what is communicated. On this view, the overall meaning of this interaction is constructed by Adam and Bella working together rather than just Adam thinking about what Bella has (done and) said. This also involves not simply treating each turn in an interaction separately but instead considering how communication extends across all of the interactive behaviour and, for some approaches, beyond this.

We will see also that pragmatics now also focuses on other things, including on nonverbal communication and on 'prosody', which is about the way utterances sound when they're produced, including pitch movements, rhythm, pace, volume and voice quality. In this example, Bella might, for example, produce an utterance which gets louder and more high-pitched towards the end. Or she might say it in a more monotone way. There are lots of possibilities and these would affect how Adam understands her. There are also things Bella might have done other than speaking which affect Adam's understanding, e.g. raising her eyebrows, opening her eyes wide, or raising her hands outwards to her side.

The rest of this book considers some of the ways in which pragmatic theorists have tried to explain how we communicate and understand each other, including in nonverbal as well as verbal communication. This rest of this chapter considers a number of questions (not all) about Bella's utterance and the wider interaction which we might expect pragmatic theories to provide answers for. We might evaluate pragmatic theories by considering to what extent they provide answers to each of these.

WHAT PRAGMATICS AIMS TO EXPLAIN

Pragmatics can be understood as being about things which are communicated beyond the meanings of linguistic expressions used. Early work focused mainly on what's communicated indirectly (e.g. that Bella is upset with Adam in the example we just discussed). There is more to explain than this, including how we work out what is directly communicated (that Bella was watching the TV in this example). Later work has recognised that we need to make inferences to work out this as well. Most theorists also now assume that pragmatics should say something about what communicators do. This section mentions some but not all of the things which pragmatic theories should aim to explain.

What is Bella communicating directly?

Adam needs to work out what Bella is communicating directly by her utterance, i.e. what exactly the words *I was watching that* 'mean' here. More technically, we might say that Adam needs to work out what proposition Bella is representing here. Roughly, this means what statement her utterance represents. More technically, in semantics and pragmatics, a proposition is something that can be evaluated to see whether it's true or false. It might seem obvious what proposition Bella is expressing here, partly because we have some idea of the context in which she said it. Imagine, though, that somebody asked you whether 'I was watching that' is true right now without letting you know who said it when, where and who they were talking to. You wouldn't be able to answer until you knew at least who the word *I* referred to and what the word *that* referred to. In fact, you'd also need to know something about the time or circumstances in which the watching took place. Here are rough characterisations of some things it could mean in different contexts:

- (5)
- a. Bella was watching the TV Adam turned off at the time when he pressed the off button.
 - b. Calum was watching the 2020 'Emmy' awards ceremony when Zendaya won the award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series.
 - c. Dani was watching the TV series *Euphoria* when it was first broadcast in 2019.
 - d. Ed was watching when his daughter sneaked a chip from her brother's plate while they were eating together.

In order to work out what is directly communicated, we need at least to work out what is being referred to by any of the referring expressions (including personal pronouns like *I* and demonstrative pronouns like *that*) and decide at what time or situation the event referred to is seen as taking place. Referring expressions also include proper names like *Adam, Bella, Calum, Dani* and *Ed*. (In fact, we haven't identified a clear referent above as we've only used the names themselves which means they could refer to anybody referred to by that name). Other referring expressions include noun phrases such as *the student with the blue rucksack* (these are called definite descriptions as they identify an individual) and *a student with a spare copy of the textbook* (indefinite descriptions as we cannot uniquely identify an individual referent for them).

We can think of working out the time or circumstances in which events take place as another kind of reference assignment and one which we always need to work out. It's important to notice that the past tense does not only indicate that the event happened before the time of the utterance. In (5a), the time is one which starts before Bella's utterance (we and Adam do not know how far back the watching began) and continues until when Adam pressed the button. In (5b), the time is further back and covers an indeterminate amount of

time when the winner of the award was announced. In (5c), we understand that Dani watched episodes of *Euphoria* either one at a time or in larger chunks around the time when they were first available. In (5d), we understand that Ed was watching the key moment at the table when his daughter took a chip from her brother's plate. A key thing to notice here is that we do not need to be certain of exactly what time or situation is being referred to in order to think that we have an understanding of the utterance.

It might not be clear here why we say 'time or circumstances' rather than simply 'time' when thinking about when events occur. This is because there are cases where the time is not important but the situation is, as here:

(6) Whenever I ask Adam to do something with me, he's always busy.

In both clauses here, there is not a specific time in mind but any situation in which the speaker asks Adam to do something.

There are other kinds of things we need to work out in order to understand what somebody has said directly. I'll mention three of them here: disambiguation of ambiguous expressions, working out what has been left out in elliptical ('missed out') expressions, and what is sometimes called 'free enrichment' where no linguistic material is thought of as missing but we still work out a bit more.

Disambiguation

In linguistics the term ambiguous usually has a narrower definition than in everyday conversations. In everyday contexts, we can say that somebody is being ambiguous whenever it is not clear exactly what they intend. In linguistics, the term is usually reserved for cases where a linguistic expression is associated with more than one linguistic meaning.

One kind of ambiguity is termed 'lexical ambiguity'. This is where a word has more than one possible meaning. There are lots of examples in all languages. In British English, the word *boot* can refer, among other things, to an item of footwear or to the space at the back of a car for storing things. We can see that ambiguity depends on what language you speak by considering other languages. In French, for example the two senses of *boot* are not associated with the same word. The most common word for the 'footwear' sense is *botte*. For the part of a car, the most common word is *coffre*. In US English, *boot* is used for the footwear sense but the other sense would usually be referred to with the word *trunk* (also ambiguous as it can refer to an elephant's nose, a large item of luggage or storage, and other things).

Lexical ambiguity arises for various reasons, often because of language change. Sometimes this involves a coincidence, e.g. the fact that *match* can mean a small wooden thing for starting a fire or a person or thing that is in some sense similar or equal to another has come about through historical accident. Strictly speaking, linguists would usually say that there are (at least) two words *match* which have different senses (rather than one word with more than one sense). In other cases, new words emerge which are related to earlier senses, e.g. *mouth* as in part of a human face or the place where a river meets the sea, where the latter has emerged from metaphorical uses of the former.

In fact, some theorists suggest that word meanings are adjusted every time they are used in order to understand exactly what a speaker intends. If I am standing by a whiteboard, for example, and ask if you have a '*pen*', you are not likely to offer me a biro but you might offer me a whiteboard marker if you have one. We might understand this as a case where the intended meaning is narrower than the more general standard meaning. Other cases can be understood as involving 'looser' than standard meanings. I might, for example, describe the venue for a concert as 'empty' even though a few people were in the

audience. Here is a real example from a website where a band member describes ‘playing to empty venues’ and suggests that this can be a positive:

- (7) And it sucked playing to an empty hall after all that big build up, on the plus side the massive amount of drinks and having just 4 peeps in the audience made us less nervous.

From:

<https://rockbandsinlondon.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/performing-to-empty-rooms/>

This is just one of several examples in the article where it is clear that ‘empty’ really means ‘close to empty’ as there are some ‘peeps’ (people) in the audience.

When words are used fairly often with similar adjusted meanings, this can lead to us deciding that the word has developed a new meaning. When we describe water we have been swimming in as ‘boiling’ or ‘freezing’ nowadays, our addressees are unlikely to think that the ‘boiling’ water is really at 100 degrees centigrade or that the ‘freezing’ water is really so cold that it is solid. We might say that these words are polysemous as they can have their original technical sense in some contexts. A much-discussed example of a loosening which has become established concerns the word *literally* which is now often used with a sense that was originally non-literal. A typical usage might be if someone says that one football team ‘*literally destroyed*’ another in a match. Similarly, a colleague of mine once told me that they had received ‘*literally millions*’ of emails about a particular topic. There is some complexity here as we could argue that *literally* is retaining its meaning but that the words around it are not being used literally. The fact that the original meaning still exists is, of course, part of the explanation for why some people object to the ‘less than literal’ sense.

Structural ambiguity (also known as 'syntactic ambiguity') occurs when a linguistic expression has more than one meaning due to the possibility of assigning two different structures to it. One kind of example occurs with conjunctions such as *learner drivers and motorcyclists* in this example:

- (8) We shouldn't allow learner drivers and motorcyclists on the new bypass.

On one reading the speaker or writer means that learner drivers and learner motorcyclists should not be allowed. On another reading, the aim would be to ban learner drivers and all motorcyclists.

It is easy to miss structural ambiguities. Here is an example from a newspaper article about Italian food which the writer (Rachel Roddy) clearly neither noticed nor intended:

- (9) Earlier this summer, I spent a day cooking with a young chef called Alessandro Venturi, who is originally from Rome and is now making and serving some of the best Roman food you will eat from a food truck in York.

Rachel Roddy. Tales from an Italian kitchen. The Guardian, 26 September 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/food/2020/sep/28/rachel-roddy-recipe-for-pasta-with-sausage-leek-and-mascarpone>

I assume that this means that Venturi serves 'some of the best Roman food you will eat' and that it is served 'from a food truck in York' rather than that of all 'the Roman food you will eat from a food truck in York', this is some of the best. It's easy to spot examples of structural

ambiguity if, for example, you can spot noun phrases with more than one modifier before the main noun. I just heard the film critic Mark Kermode say he is a ‘huge disaster movie fan’. Have a think about what the options are here, e.g. is he a fan of movies that are huge disasters? Or is he a disaster movie fan who is also huge? (This reading involves a bit of lexical ambiguity too, of course).

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is the term for cases where we understand that speakers have not pronounced some linguistic material which they could have said, trusting hearers to work out what is missing.

Here are two examples:

- (10) Adam: Calum needs a model to practise on for his
hairdressing exam. Can you do that for him?
Bella: I don't want to.
- (11) Adam: Bella says she'll help Calum with his homework if
Calum helps with hers.
Dani: Seems reasonable.

In (10), we can see that Bella means that she doesn't want to be a model for Calum and has assumed that we will know what it is that she doesn't want to (do). In (11), Dani has missed out the subject and trusted Adam to work out that she (Dani) thinks that what Bella has proposed seems reasonable. There are many cases in everyday conversation and in other contexts where we ‘miss out’ some linguistic material like this and assume that our addressees will work out what we mean.

Other assumptions

There are other things we assume when working out what somebody has directly communicated. Here are three examples:

- (12) I'm ready.
- (13) The temperature's dropped.
- (14) Bella's got skills.

We are not likely to assume that the speaker of (12) is just ready for something or other. Instead, we will decide that she is ready for something in particular, e.g. that she is ready to go for a walk or to have a discussion about something. In (13), we will make an assumption about where the temperature has dropped and/or what has undergone a change in temperature, e.g. the outside temperature in our location (due to a change in the weather), or the temperature in the room we are in. We might also assume that the temperature of a particular thing has dropped, e.g. of an oven or a fridge. In (14), we are likely to make an assumption about the kinds of skills Bella has, e.g. as a skateboarder or as a cook. Exactly what we decide in each case will depend on the context.

What is Bella communicating indirectly?

When you read '*I was watching that*' in the example above, I am sure that you assumed more than what you think Bella communicated directly, i.e. that Bella had been watching the TV that Adam turned off. You are very likely also to have assumed that she was trying to communicate something indirectly. Here are some things you might have assumed that Bella intended:

- (15) a. Bella is unhappy that Adam turned the TV off
- b. Bella wanted to carry on watching the TV

- c. Bella is not happy with Adam because of what he did

I am sure that you can think of others. In pragmatics, these indirectly communicated assumptions are termed 'implicatures' (the term comes from the work of Paul Grice, whose ideas are discussed in the next chapter).

A key feature of implicatures is that they are worked out on the basis not only of what the communicator said, wrote or signed but also based on assumptions about the context in which they communicated. As mentioned above, in a different context, an utterance of the expression *I was watching that* would not lead to any of the conclusions in (15).

How do we recognise what counts as an implicature? There has been debate about this but a common way of thinking about implicatures involves seeing them as conclusions which follow neither from what is directly communicated alone, nor from things we understand from the context, but only from a combination of the two. It does not follow, for example, from the fact that Bella was watching the TV that she wishes Adam hadn't turned it off. For that, we need to make some other assumptions about Bella or about people in general, e.g. that people watch things because they enjoy them and that Bella is likely to have been enjoying the programme and wanting to watch more of it. At the same time, these assumptions alone will not lead to implicatures. We need also to know that Bella has said she was watching the TV. It is the combination of contextual assumptions and what was directly communicated that leads to the implicature.

How sure can we be of what Bella is communicating?

In early discussions of implicatures, it was assumed that indirect communication was fairly simple. A speaker says something and implicates something else. A classic kind of example would be (16):

(16) Adam: Do you think Calum would like a piece of this cake?

Bella: He's vegan.

An explanation of what Bella intended might simply say that she directly communicated (17) and implicated (18):

(17) Calum is vegan at the time at which Bella is speaking

(18) Calum will not want a piece of cake.

To explain this, we would go on to consider which contextual assumptions interact with (17) to give rise to (18). These might include:

- (19) a. Vegans do not eat or use anything which involves the exploitation of animal products.
- b. The cake Adam has asked about contains animal products or things derived from them.

A standard account, putting aside that we need to work out that *'he's vegan'* (directly) communicates that Calum has the property of being vegan, might assume that Adam will access the contextual assumption that vegans would not want to eat this cake because it contains things vegans don't eat and assume that this will enable Adam to work out that (Bella thinks that) Calum will not want to eat any of the cake because it contains things he chooses not to eat.

This account also assumes fairly straightforwardly that Bella's utterance implicates this assumption and treats this as 'either/or', i.e. that Bella either implicates this or doesn't. More recent approaches recognise that implicatures can be more or less strongly communicated.

On these accounts we can be more or less sure that Bella intends to communicate this rather than this simply being a question of whether she is communicating it or not.

In fact, any implicature can be understood as more or less strongly communicated and we can understand this more fully by looking at implicatures which are less clear. Returning to the example at the start of this chapter, we might consider how many things Bella's utterance gives evidence for. Here is a list of things she might intend, starting with those mentioned above:

- (20) a. Bella is unhappy that Adam turned the TV off.
- b. Bella wanted to carry on watching.
- c. Bella is not happy with Adam because of what he did.
- d. Bella thinks that Adam is insensitive.
- e. Bella thinks that Adam does not care about her feelings or needs.
- f. Adam is thoughtless.
- g. Adam is self-centred.
- h. Adam does not care much about other people.

I expect that some of these seem more plausible than others. Some of them are likely to seem a bit of a stretch. What's important to notice here is that they vary with regard to how strongly we think that Bella is likely to have intended them. We can be very sure of (20a) and (20b), less confident of (20c), less still of (20d) and so on through to (20h), which we can definitely be less sure about and which you might even think is implausible. However, Bella's utterance does provide at least some evidence for (20h). We can see this by asking whether we would be more or less likely to believe it if the only evidence we had was Bella's utterance.

What this shows is that implicatures can be stronger or weaker rather than just simply communicated or not.

How literal is Bella being?

So far, we have only mentioned in passing the idea that we can use particular expressions more or less literally (in discussing the word *literally*). This is another area where addressees need to make inferences in order to understand what is being communicated.

Alongside examples such as the colleague I mentioned above who reported receiving '*literally millions of emails*', there are lots of loose uses of language. Here are three examples:

- (21) There are 67 million people in the UK.
- (22) Newcastle is 250 miles from Aberdeen.
- (23) Belgium is good for cycling because it's flat.

We wouldn't usually think the speakers here are lying if we find out that (as reported on the Eurostat website where I just checked) there are 66.65 million people in the UK (which is also an approximation, of course), if Aberdeen is 254 miles from Newcastle (also an approximation), or if some parts of Belgium are at a higher altitude than others.

In fact, even cases which seem more straightforward can be understood as more or less literal. When Bella said she '*was watching that*', do we assume that she was looking at the TV throughout the time she was sitting in front of it? We would not find it odd if she was looking away now and then or even if she left the room while it was on. She could even have been looking at her phone throughout the time that she was sitting there, maybe listening to (parts of?) it while doing so. So one thing we need to make assumptions about is how close what has been said is to its literal meaning.

In fact, there are so many cases like this that some theorists question the idea that there is a clear distinction between literal and non-literal uses of language. Instead, the assumption is that utterances can be more or less close to what we would think of as a literal meaning. In many cases, we might not even spend much mental effort to work out how loose or literal an utterance is (Bella's utterance about watching TV could be an example).

Perhaps confusingly, we also talk about non-literal uses when considering both metaphor and irony, even though they work in quite different ways.

Is Bella being metaphorical?

There is a relationship between non-literal utterances and metaphor. Typically, people think of metaphorical utterances as ones where the speaker does not intend what their utterance seems to say but something related in some way. Here are some examples:

- (24) Politeness on the London underground is a unicorn.
- (25) I tried answering with a joke but it died of neglect before anybody worked out what I meant.
- (26) The autopsy showed that my wit died of natural causes. I think a bit of tender loving care could have saved it, though.

Traditionally, metaphorical utterances have been seen as cases where a speaker says something false but intends to communicate something true. Some pragmaticists have seen the true communicated assumption as an implicature. (24) would implicate that politeness does not exist on the London underground, (25) that the audience did not laugh or respond positively to the joke, (26) extends the idea in (25) and implicates more strongly that the audience did not respond as if this was a joke. In each case, the idea usually is that what is intended shares some properties of what has been said (if taken literally). In (24), politeness

on the underground is seen as very rare, as are unicorns. In (25), the joke fell flat in a way which shares some properties with a person or animal dying because it has not received the treatment it needs to keep going or flourish (both of these are themselves metaphorical when thinking about the joke, of course). (26) is a more complicated or sophisticated version of (25), counting on the audience to be quite creative in working out what is meant.

Other approaches argue that the traditional account doesn't work, partly because the implicatures I have just suggested don't seem to capture very well the effects of the metaphorical utterance. In any case, we expect pragmatic theories to be able to explain how metaphorical utterances like these are understood, as well as how addressees work out not to take them literally.

Is Bella communicating her own thoughts?

Another thing we have to work out when understanding utterances is whether the speaker is representing their own thoughts or attributing what they have expressed to somebody else.

Suppose that Calum comes into the room after Adam has turned off the TV in the example above, asks Adam what Bella said, and Adam replies:

(27) I was watching that.

Here, we would be unlikely to assume that Adam is communicating that he was watching something and more likely to think that he is letting Calum know what Bella had said. The first interpretation is possible, though, which shows that we make inferences about this when understanding utterances.

We can report other people's thoughts as well as their utterances. Suppose that Adam asks Bella what Calum thinks of chips and she replies:

(28) They're disgusting.

We might decide that Bella is not answering Adam's question but instead telling her what she (Bella) thinks of chips. If we think Bella is attributing this to Calum, we can assume either that this represents something Calum said or something he thinks. We will also have to make an assumption about how close this is to Calum's utterance or thought. Calum might, for example, have said 'they're disgusting' when asked about chips. He might have said something else (such as 'Chips? Gross!'). Or Bella might be representing what Calum thinks based on a range of utterances or behaviours.

When we report the speech and thought of others, we can also indicate that we are doing this, and whether we are representing thoughts or utterances. We might, for example say things like:

(29) She said, 'I was watching that'

(30) She said she was watching the telly.

(31) He thinks they're disgusting.

(32) He says they're disgusting.

There are lots of examples of more or less close representations of speech and thought in everyday discourse as well as in fiction and other forms of writing. Strictly speaking, we need to work out for every utterance whether the speaker is communicating their own thoughts or reporting somebody else's thoughts or utterance. If we decide it is somebody else's, then we also need to work out how close we think this utterance is to what was originally said, written or signed.

Is Bella being ironic?

Ironical utterances are related to cases where we represent somebody else's speech or thoughts. Classic examples would be cases where a speaker seems to be saying something positive but in fact intends something negative. Suppose, for example, that we have just watched a football match in which the team we support has lost 10-0 and you say:

(33) That went well.

Here, you are likely to decide that I cannot be expressing this positive view and instead decide that I am commenting ironically on the team's terrible performance.

We can also imagine Bella producing an ironic response when Adam turns off the TV she is watching. She might, for example, say one of the following:

(34) Thanks for your concern. I probably do watch too much TV.

(35) Thank you so much for ruining my fun.

(36) Thanks. I probably wouldn't have enjoyed the ending anyway.

Adam is likely to recognise that Bella is not grateful and, as with the non-ironical utterance, that she wishes he hadn't done this.

It would also have been possible for Adam to respond to Bella's utterance (*'I was watching that'*) ironically. Suppose that Adam's and Bella's relationship is not going well and he responds to Bella's utterance above like this:

(37) I was watching that. You're spilling crumbs on the sofa. Do you have to leave the door open? Can I ever do anything right?

Here, we would not assume that Adam is communicating that he was watching anything but instead echoing Bella's utterances (more or less accurately) and intending to convey a negative attitude to them. The final clause here ('Can I ever do anything right?') could be taken to represent a thought of Adam's but it could also be a representation of a possible thought of Bella's, i.e. he could be attributing a thought like 'can he ever do anything right?' to Bella. If so, again, Adam will need to work out how closely this represents the thought he is attributing to her.

Traditional accounts of irony treat them in a similar way to metaphor, i.e. as cases where the speaker says something false and intends the addressee to infer something true (in some pragmatic accounts, an implicature), usually the opposite of what seems to have been said. In (33), for example, the intention would be to communicate that the match did not go well.

Again, there are other accounts which reject this view, partly because not all ironical utterances can be understood as communicating the opposite of what the speaker has said. In (34)-(36), for example, it's not clear what the opposite would be and it's not clear that Bella is simply communicating that she is not thanking Adam.

Another issue is that traditional accounts do not explain why speakers produce metaphorical and ironical utterances rather than just saying something like '*Politeness doesn't exist on the London Underground*' or '*That didn't go well*'. They always seem to communicate more than this. An alternative sees ironical utterances as related to cases where the speaker represents somebody else's speech or thoughts as well as that the speaker has a negative attitude to these thoughts.

What about how Bella says her utterance?

As mentioned above, understanding is also affected by how we say things. What I have in mind here is technically called 'prosody'. It refers to all aspects of the way the utterance

sounds other than those involved in working out what linguistic forms Bella is using (or representing through her speech sounds). Key things here include pitch movement, rhythm, pace, volume and voice quality. For example, Adam will understand Bella's utterance differently if she says it with a falling pitch or a rising pitch. (I have indicated these here with a rising line for rising pitch and a falling one for a falling pitch, without worrying about other details, such as whether they begin and end high or low compared to the rest of Bella's speech).

(38) I was \ watching that.

(39) I was / watching that.

A common but incorrect assumption is that in English falling pitch is associated with statements and rising pitch with questions. In fact, we can ask questions with falling pitch and make statements with rising pitch.

We can also affect understanding by the speed and rhythm at which we speak. One way of producing utterances is often indicated with full stops where they wouldn't usually appear inside clauses:

(40) I. Was. Watching. That.

In English, pausing after each word and keeping to a strict rhythm has significant consequences for interpretations, which are quite different from producing a very fast utterance where the syllables are close together in a more continuous stream.

We can also affect interpretations by changing the volume of our utterances (shouting or speaking quietly) or our voice quality (whispering or using a 'creaky' voice).

So it is not just the words we use which help us to understand each other.

What about Bella's nonverbal behaviour?

Communication is also affected by nonverbal behaviour. If Bella speaks with her head bowed and hardly moving, Adam (if he looks at her) will understand the utterance differently from how he would take it if Bella leapt to her feet, threw her arms to the side and raised her eyebrows.

As well as nonverbal behaviour accompanying speech, we can communicate only nonverbally, i.e. without speaking at all. Bella might, for example, make a nonverbal sound (e.g. a high-pitched noise with no discernible linguistic content indicating unhappiness, a sigh, or a loud cough) or she might do something else, such as standing up and leaving the room with shoulders slumped. Or she might stand and tower over Adam in a pretend menacing way.

While accounts of the meanings of nonverbal behaviour in general is not usually seen as a task for pragmatic theories, we do expect them to explain how we work out from those meanings what is intended in specific contexts.

How do Adam and Bella construct meanings together?

In 'early' (i.e. mid-to-late twentieth century) work in pragmatics, discussion often focused on individual turns in an interaction, e.g. just Bella's utterance in this interaction, as we have been doing here. They also often focused mainly on how addressees (Adam here) worked out what they think the communicator (Bella) intended.

However, communication does not involve just a series of individual turns and communicators do not simply provide turns which addressees then interpret. Rather, interpretation extends over a number of turns (and sometimes interpretation carries on after the interaction) and communicators work together to 'negotiate' or 'co-construct' communication.

Pragmatic theories should explain how what is communicated follows from the behaviour of everybody who is interacting and how it can carry on after the immediate interaction.

We can see how communication is collaborative by thinking about how Adam responds to Bella's utterance and how she responds to that. Imagine, for example, Adam responding to Bella's utterance by apologising straight away, maybe with some nonverbal behaviour to indicate surprise and regret. Bella might then respond quite positively to that, as in the continued exchange in (41):

- (41) Adam: Oh, I'm really sorry, I didn't see you there! I'll put it on again. *(He switches the TV back on).*
- Bella: Thanks. Don't worry. I was only half paying attention anyway.

Or she might respond more negatively to this as here:

- (42) Adam: Oh, I'm really sorry, I didn't see you there! I'll put it on again. *(He switches the TV back on).*
- Bella: Sure you didn't. *(Pause)* You're always doing things like this! *(She walks out)*

In the first case, Bella clearly accepts Adam's apology, tells him not to worry about it, and indicates that the interruption of her viewing is not as serious as it would have been if she had been following the programme really closely. In the second case, she makes clear that she does not think his apology is serious and suggests that it follows a pattern where Adam doesn't take what Bella wants seriously. We'll consider in chapter five how things we do

when communicating can contribute to making interactions more or less polite or impolite. For now, notice that the nature of the interaction is determined not just by one of the people involved but by what they both do and how they respond to each other. It also arises from the whole sequence of utterances and not just from each utterance individually.

We can still talk, of course, about what an individual intends by what they say and do as well as about how an individual understands what others say or do (even though both of these might not be fully clear, even to the individuals themselves), but we also need to recognise how they work together to create communication and understanding.

An important gap

Many theorists and others who have discussed how we communicate and understand each other in specific situations have identified some of these aspects of what is involved:

- a. Linguistic expressions with specific meanings
- b. Nonverbal behaviour, some with specific meanings
- c. Contextual assumptions which affect how we make inferences
- d. Inferences involved in working out what is directly communicated
- e. Inferences involved in working out what is indirectly communicated

If we can identify each of these things, we go some way towards explaining how communicative behaviour is produced and understood. As I mentioned above, early work focused mainly on how we understand communicative acts. Going back to the example at the start of this chapter, we can say the following about Bella's utterance (making some assumptions about how Bella said it and the context):

- a. Bella produced sounds which represent the linguistic forms / was watching that
- b. Bella said this with prosody and nonverbal behaviour suggesting that she is surprised and unhappy
- c. Adam and Bella can access contextual assumptions including that Bella was in the room when Adam came in, that Adam turned off the TV, that people who are watching something on TV want the TV to remain switched on
- d. That Adam infers that Bella is communicating that Bella was watching something on the TV which Adam has just turned off
- e. That Adam infers that Bella is upset that he has turned off the TV and that she wants it turned on again

If we say all of this, we have left a big gap in our explanation. We have said nothing about what guides Adam to make these inferences, i.e. about how exactly Adam works out what Bella is communicating directly and indirectly. While the interpretation Adam goes for might seem obvious, we need to explain what leads him in this direction rather than towards other possibilities. Why, for example, does he not think that she is saying she was watching something else, and how does he know that she wishes he hadn't turned it off and would like it turned on again? In the next chapter, we will look at ideas proposed by Paul Grice which are generally acknowledged as the first proposal made for how we can explain this.

FINDING OUT MORE

Here are some ideas for things you might do to develop understanding of ideas in the chapter and to find out more, followed by some suggested further reading.

Your own examples

It's always helpful to notice and try to explain your own examples. So look out for and make notes of any interesting examples you come across and see if you can relate them to ideas in each chapter of the book. For this chapter, the main thing to focus on is how things other than linguistic meanings are involved in interaction and the kinds of inferences you think have been made by people involved. You can also consider each of the things discussed in the chapter which pragmatics aims to explain. To see how well you understand each one, try to come up with examples (real or invented) of your own which you could use to explain them to somebody else.

Misunderstandings

Make a note of any cases where you misunderstand communicative acts or where other people do. See if you can pinpoint the source of misunderstanding and if you can refer to ideas from this chapter to help explain things.

Examples from media

Keep your eyes and ears open for examples in film, TV, literature, adverts, newspapers, etc. Look out for examples which reveal something about communication. Again, see if you can refer to ideas from this chapter to help explain things.

Artificial communication

To help you think about all of the complexities involved in human communication, look at examples where machines 'communicate' artificially, e.g. the virtual assistant on a smartphone or recorded options when you call a business number. What does the machine do which is different from what a human would be likely to do?

Face-to-face and other kinds of communication

Compare face-to-face communication with other kinds, e.g. with email, text messages, social message services online. What kinds of things do we do for each type of communication and how are they different from each other? (To take one example, the pitch of our voices can change when speaking but not when typing). Some researchers have suggested that some of the things we do when texting or emailing aim to perform functions similar to things like intonation, facial movements or body language. Consider some of these different options and their effects.

Further reading

There's a lot of writing and research on pragmatics and so you could spend a lot of time reading about it. Luckily, there are also some very good textbooks. Here are some suggestions to get you started. The ones I have chosen here are accessible and have useful examples. As many tutors and students nowadays look for recent references, it's worth pointing out that the books with earlier publication dates (by Stephen Levinson, Jenny Thomas, and Jean Stilwell Peccei) are all very clear and still useful.

Birner, Betty J. 2012. *Introduction to Pragmatics*, Wiley-Blackwell.

Chapman, Siobhan. 2011. *Pragmatics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Culpeper, Jonathan and Michael Haugh. 2014. *Pragmatics and the English Language*.

Palgrave Macmillan. (A useful introduction to ideas about pragmatics, even though, like this book, it focuses on English varieties).

Cummins, Chris. 2019. *Pragmatics*. Edinburgh University Press.

Cutting, Joan and Kenneth Fordyce. 2020. *Pragmatics: A resource book for students*, 4th edition. Routledge.

Peter Grundy. 2019. *Doing Pragmatics*, 4th edition. Routledge.

Huang, Yan. 2014. Pragmatics, 2nd edition. Oxford University Press.

Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. Pragmatics. Cambridge University Press.

O’Keeffe, Anne, Brian Clancy and Svenja Adolphs. 2019. Introducing Pragmatics in Use.
Routledge.

Peccei, Jean Stillwell. 1999. Pragmatics. Routledge.

Thomas, Jenny. 1995. Meaning in Interaction. Routledge.