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A Pragmatic Study of Language Use

Yasuyuki NAKATA

In this paper I would like to argue, providing the readers with some clear concrete examples, why a socio-pragmatic consideration is indispensable for analyzing actual everyday linguistic behavior. Since Chomsky's influential work (specifically 1957, 1965) appeared, many linguistic practitioners have tried to focus on issues involving linguistic competence, postulating that the eventual aim in their research was to make clear what linguistic competence is like. This is because, it was claimed, linguistic competence underlies every actual piece of linguistic activity (Cf. Chomsky, 1965: 4). Needless to say, this kind of (TG) approach arguing for linguistic competence caused a lot of prolific investigations into the nature of the relations between purely syntactic/semantic issues and some of those in applied linguistics; say, ones involved in psycholinguistic researches. However, we must recognize that there are still a lot of linguistic issues that necessarily await a pragmatic analysis.

Widdowson (1978: 2) presents the following famous examples, illustrating the difference between "linguistic usage" and "language use".

1) A: What did the rain do?
   B: The crops were destroyed by the rain.

2) A: What did the rain do?
   B: It destroyed the crops.

In a normal conversational situation B's reply in 1) is a wrong kind of reply. In 2), however, B replies quite appropriately to A's question. "Making an appropriate reply is a matter of selecting a sentence which will combine with the sentence used for asking the question," suggests Widdowson (1978: 2). This obviously implies the importance of the context where the interactional appropriacy is not necessarily guaranteed by the grammatical correctness of an utterance alone. According to Widdowson, the distinction between "usage" and "use" is as follows:

3) Usage...is one aspect of performance, that aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. (1978: 3)

In this view, it is clear that 1) is an instance of "usage" and 2) is one of "use". It may be suggested that this kind of distinction on the level of performance might be of some help in our discussion about the indispensability of pragmatic consideration in making
more explicit what actual human language behavior is like.

Another relevant set of notions Widdowson introduces in his illuminating book should be referred to here. To clarify the nature of the set of notions, we may again refer to Widdowson’s examples (Widdowson, 1978: 27, 29):

4) A: What are the police doing?
   B: They are arresting the demonstrators.
5) A: That’s the telephone.
   B: I’m in the bath.
   A: O. K.

These two exchanges are obviously instances of language use in the sense referred to above in 3). The propositional link in the exchange in 4) is directly established by the occurrence of the personal pronoun they in B’s reply. On the contrary, in the exchange in 5) the propositional link cannot be established so easily as in 4). Thus, in the case of the exchange in 5) we must surmise the propositional link so as to establish the communicative relevance in the exchange between A and B. As adults who live in a civilized society we know that if someone says things like “That’s the telephone,” s/he is engaged in a certain chore which it is somewhat difficult to leave as it is. Hence, A’s remark can possibly be regarded as a request to B to answer the telephone. Also, B’s reply implies that s/he cannot comply with A’s request, since, as adults who share a certain degree of knowledge of the world, we know that someone in the bath is not able to show up immediately. A’s second remark is, therefore, a subsequent consent to answer the telephone himself/herself. In Widdowson’s terminology 4) is an example of “cohesion” and 5) one of “coherence” (1978: 24–29). A cohesive sentence is one where the grammatical connection is directly observable in the superficial structures. And 5) is an instance of coherence where the grammatical link is not established directly in the superficial structures. Thus, it might be plausible to claim that one must somehow try to capture the propositional link which assigns readings to coherent sentences. The discussion given thus far might be impeccable so far as it is an argument about the difference between “usage” and “use” and that between “cohesion” and “coherence”. However, a somewhat intrinsically different kind of analysis might be feasible to the effect that 5) should rather be given a societal–pragmatic interpretation. As was suggested above, as adults with a certain amount of “shared knowledge” of the society, we know that it is somewhat offensive to show up in front of others without wearing anything. This is why the exchange in 5) can be regarded as a reply to A’s request. This kind of reasoning is primarily societal–pragmatic in its nature. Thus, instance 5) is not simply one of “coherence” but also one illustrating the indispensability of societal–pragmatic understanding of the communicative environment.

Furthermore, it is easy to present other coherent examples similar as one given in 5). Here I would like to show a single instance which exemplifies the importance of societal–pragmatic knowledge commonly shared between the interlocutors.
6) A: What time is it now?
   B: You won't be in time for the class.

As Mey (1994: 40) suggests, we cannot recover the propositional link unless we share some pragmatic knowledge commonly held between A and B. It is not so difficult to imagine a situation where A and B are university students and B knows that A usually attends such and such a class regularly, say, on Monday. The pragmatically important situation is something like this: A sees B in the university campus on a certain Monday; A is walking quickly and seems to be in a hurry for his regular class; B knows that A usually attends such and such a regular class on Monday; A is uncertain about what time it is exactly, since, as he was in a great hurry when he left home, it happened that he forgot to bring his wrist watch with him, which is the reason A asks B what time it is. It is thus obvious that this kind of reasoning of pragmatic relevance makes communication between A and B in 6) possible.

Next, in this section, I should like to present two exchanges to show that a societal-pragmatic understanding of the communicative environment prevails the logical relations which we might reason in the semantic interpretation of sentences. Consider, for example:

7) Mother: Have you broken the windowpane, Tom?
   Child: (almost in a whisper) I've not done nothing.

As might be clear from our general knowledge of human behavior, it may be probable, from Tom's way of replying to his mother's question, that he happened to break the windowpane, for example, with a ball or with a stick. As a child, Tom knows if he said "Yes" to his mother's question, he would be scolded. This is why he replies in a weak voice and probably in an unconfident manner. The real fact might be that Tom has broken the windowpane; superficially, however, "I've not done nothing" clearly does not imply that he has done something. Rather his way of replying in which a double negation occurs helps to strengthen the negation. Thus, it is obviously impossible to apply logical reasoning to natural language behavior.

Another example presents itself. This example is also from Mey (1994: 23-4):

8) a. Getting married and having a child is much better than having a child and getting married.
   b. Having a child and getting married is much better than getting married and having a child.

In logical reasoning \( a \& b \) is virtually equal to \( b \& a \); however, this kind of logical reasoning is just inapplicable to 8). In the actual world \( a \& b \) simply is not equal to \( b \& a \); in human language behavior, people usually tend to suppose that what is said earlier actually occurred earlier than what is said afterwards. In this connection we may suggest that there are a lot of chances to find in utterances by adults to young children the occurrences of clauses in iconical order (in which the order of the clauses is as the events have occurred in the actual world. We may also refer to Romaine's
suggestion that ‘there is something which indicates that young children have difficulty
in interpreting sentences in which syntax and context are at variance’ (Romaine. 1984:
155). Thus, 8a) is normal in a society where people more or less accept the idea that
it is legally much better for a person to get married before s/he has a child. Doubtlessly 8)
represents a pragmatically interesting example. In other words, grammatical relations or
logical reasonings can not give an account of why 8b) is
unacceptable in the world where people live in a Westernized civilization.

Issues concerning logical reference and pronominal reference seem to be
necessarily involved in a theory of pragmatics. I would like to present a few examples
which might be of interest. First, let us consider 9):

9) A: I just met the old Irishman and his son, coming out of the toilet.
   B: I wouldn’t have thought there was room for the two of them.
   A: No silly, I mean I was coming out of the toilet. They were waiting.

This is an example from Mey (1994: 7). He presents this example to validate the fact
that there is no such thing as ambiguity in actual human language behavior, as is often
suggested in a traditional TG theory. No doubt, ambiguity occurs on the part of the
receiver (hearer). In the first utterance by A in 9) the person meant that he saw two
men when he came out of the toilet; while B misunderstood the portion of “coming out
of the toilet” in A’s first utterance. As Mey points out, “sometimes a pragmatic
account is the only possible one,” which is the case with 9) (1994: 7).

Next, I would like to shed light on a few examples of pronominal reference.
First, I would like to present an intriguing example from Halliday and Hasan (1976:
2):

10) Wash and core six cooking apples. Put them into a fireproof dish.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) adopts a very straightforward view of coreference between
six cooking apples and them, by simply assuming that them replaces six cooking apples.
According to their view it is obviously the identical apples which them in the second
sentence refers to; however, it is “relevant to note, and for the reader to understand,
that they have undergone change of state” (Brown and Yule, 1983: 201). In the first
sentence, the apples were, as it were, pristine apples straight from a market, a street
vender, or whatever, whereas, in the second sentence, they were “washed and cored.”
10) is an example which obviously shows a rapid change in the state of affairs. In a
recipe things transform themselves very quickly. In the real world, we actually see
how apples are washed and cored. Thus, it is clearly in the actual world where people
respond to what they hear or behave as they were told that the imperative sentence has
a meaning.

Now we should here refer to some other examples of pronominal reference of
which it is obviously impossible to give an account, since the occurrence of personal
pronouns clearly violates the ordinary structural descriptions for their occurrence.
This is the reason why examples such as are given below have not been given enough
attention in a traditional TG framework. In a theory of pronominal reference, it might be summarized that people usually have paid most of their attention to those cases of formal coreference. It is not for nothing that pragmatics is apt to be regarded as if it were a “waste basket” of “Divine Syntax” (Mey, 1994: 44). However, there are a lot of actual instances where there occur pronouns which the traditional TG theory and the GB theory have found it somewhat hard to incorporate in their own frameworks. Hence, such instances as are given below have been largely ignored. Only a few examples should be enough to show how much we need a pragmatic approach to those instances that are given below:

11) I flew a KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines) Boeing 747 jumbo jet which left Narita for Schiphol International Airport, Amsterdam. . . . We arrived in Amsterdam exactly on time. . . .

The first person pronoun “I” in the first sentence is deictic; as is normally the case, it always refers to the author (or the speaker). What is extremely interesting here from a pragmatic viewpoint is the occurrence of “we” in the second sentence. “we” is not a pronoun of deictic use, since, given the macro-pragmatic context, the intended referent is to be contextually defined without much difficulty. One more example of this sort, which is much more intriguing, should be referred to here. 12) is from J. Dougill’s Oxford (Seibido Publishing Co., 1990: 36).

12) On another occasion I went punting with a couple of girls and my friend Willy. As we passed under a low bridge, Willy, who was punting, pushed against it as hard as he could to increase our speed. The boat shot forward, and Willy was left hanging from the bridge! We could only look on in amusement as Willy struggled to keep his hold. But just at that moment and quite by chance, another punt appeared and passed under the bridge exactly beneath Willy’s dangling feet. To his relief and their surprise, Willy let go and landed right in the middle of their cucumber sandwiches!

The pronoun whose occurrence must be accounted for macro-pragmatically is “their” in the last sentence. Of course, there is no direct referent with which the pronoun can be coreferential. However, the author of this passage presupposes that the reader knows something about a punt, which is a long, narrow and flat-bottomed boat with a square end with someone standing on it pushing a long pole against the river bottom to move the boat. This is not the very important kind of information to get to a solution to the present problem: who are the persons referred to by “their”? It is not so difficult to suppose that there were a few people on the punt in question in the above passage and they were eating sandwiches when Willy quite abruptly landed on their sandwiches. Thus, the pronoun obviously refers to the persons on the punt in question.

I would like to provide the readers with one more example, somewhat similar to 12), which, however, requires us of a slightly more complicated account. 13), from Brown and Yule (1983: 203), is particularly noteworthy, and hence deserves a special
comment here.

13) STOP BUS VANDALS
   by reporting it at once
to the driver or conductor (sign post in Edinburgh buses)

The point to be made clear here is that in a case like 13) superficial lexico-syntactic forms do not supply us with a way to solve the occurrence of the proform in this instance. What we must concern ourselves here is the presupposed proposition, which is invariably pragmatic in nature, of STOP BUS VANDALS, since, once we hear or see the lexical item vandals, we usually and probably necessarily, assume that “vandals do an act of vandalism”, which is underlyingly presupposed in this case. This underlying presupposed proposition obviously triggers pronominalization to be operated in the position where it occurred in 13). Thus, 13) is also another instance which exemplifies the fact that pronominalization is feasible not merely under the strictly formal and lexico-syntactic conditions but also under socio-pragmatic conditions.

Before concluding the present discussion, I should mention one more example, which is from Jonathan Swift's famous fiction, *Gulliver's Travels*. The extract given below is a passage in the second part of the story where Gulliver travels into the remote nation of the Brobdingnags where he is captured and is exposed to public view.

14) However, an unlucky schoolboy aimed a hazel nut directly at my head, which very narrowly missed me; otherwise, it came with so much violence that it would infallibly knocked out my brains, for it was almost as large as a small pumion: but I had the satisfaction to see the young rogue well beaten, turned out of the room.

14) is extremely interesting in that it exemplifies the fact that the reader's empathy is invariably involved in the interpretation of coreferential relations in a literary work. From a pragmatic point of view, it might be suggested that the reader’s empathy for the hero necessarily comes from his/her own everyday psychology. Without the reader's emphatic compassion upon poor Gulliver exposed to public view, 14) has nothing to appeal to the reader. It may be assumed that this is exactly what the author of this fiction subconsciously intended. What must be emphasized is the fact that the pragmatic understanding, on the part of the reader, of the scene and the situation where the characters find themselves enables him/her to attain the “authenticity” (again the term employed by Widdowson, 1979: 163-72), which is a notion of communicative interpretation, performed by the potent reader, of language materials.
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