The Relation between Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics

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A pesar de que no existe una manera simple de definir cuándo y cómo pueden separarse la sintaxis, la semántica y la pragmática algunos estudios sobre de las características inherentes del lenguaje humano demuestran que lejos de encontrar maneras de separarlas, han llegado a la conclusión sobre la manera y la razón en que se relacionan y traslapan. Cada una con un enfoque distinto hacia la comunicación e interacción humana, depende de las otras dos. La hipótesis que se elabora a continuación, requiere un análisis lingüístico que distinga tal interconexión, acomode nuevos campos de la investigación lingüística, y entienda el papel tan importante que juega la pragmática en el uso de la lengua.

Although there is no simple way to define when or how syntax, semantics and pragmatics can be separated, studies on the inherent characteristics of human language show that far from finding ways to separate them, they have agreed more and more on how and why they interrelate and overlap. Each, as a different linguistic approach to human communication and interaction, depends on the other two. The hypothesis elaborated below calls for a framework of linguistic analysis which recognizes this inter-connectness, accommodates new fields of linguistic research, and understands the important role pragmatics plays in language use.

S yntax is the study of the linguistic structure, of how each and every language item interrelates and correlates grammatically with other items at the sentence level through sets of fixed rules. Knowing a language entails getting acquainted with these syntactical rules for the expectedly correct arrangement of every language unit ("sign"). The study of syntax is not complete unless that fixed structure of units makes sense, has meaning, is understood and shared by those who know how to handle them, namely, by those who speak, listen, write and read well-formed sentences in a given language. This determines only part of what it means to know a language like Spanish, whose arrangement/structure of units can be

flexible. Conventionally and conversationally Spanish is used and understood, in a general way, by any of its speakers and listeners, with practically no change of meaning, at least not so drastic as to block communication or interaction. The question is how one learning Spanish can be taught the flexibility of alternatives if his first language, say English, does not allow structure permutations without change of meaning.

Semantics is the study of meaning at mainly two different, basic levels: the word and the sentence. There exist chain and choice (that is, structural or lexical, horizontally or vertically). Chain refers to a particular form or part of speech (noun, adjective, preposition, verb, etc.); choice refers to the selection between, for example, "child or kid." Semantics also deals with "shades" of meaning (polysemy) interpretations, presuppositions, implications, compositional meaning, figures of speech such as metaphors and similes, plus semantic conditions of truth which are all culture-bound. Every culture has a language to express its world meaning, but only according to the view of the world that a group of people has developed in order to belong to its particular group or speech community. For example, in Mexican Spanish, the word for "ice cream" in the north of Mexico is the same as the word for "snow" ("nieve"). In the south of Mexico, "snow" is the same word as "frozen" ("helado"). Many other words are different and help to identify where speakers come from and to what speech community they belong. The phonological and phonetic aspects of language also work in tandem with syntactic as well as semantic rules to add, change or further specify a meaning. Wierzbicka says

> Language is an integrated system, where everything "conspires" to convey meaning: words, grammatical constructions and various "illocutionary" devices (including intonation) ...meaning consists in human interpretation of the world. It is subjective, it is anthropocentric, it reflects predominant cultural concerns and culture-specific modes of social interaction as much a any objective features of the world as such. (*Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, 16-17)

Pragmatics is the study of the relation of language units to language users, "with all psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs" (Morris 43). The psychological

aspect has to do with our experience, which normally reinforces our cognitive development and the level of maturity with which we use it. The biological aspect concerns issues of sex (gender), age and behavior, and physical development. Sociological factors have to do with social status, education, political institutions, and social as well as societal rules. They can be both constitutive and regulative which ultimately determine, and allow for, the way or ways syntactic-semantic rules and pragmatic principles should work in agreement.

Pragmatics should be studied from at least two different perspectives, namely, linguistic and extra-linguistic. Linguistic pragmatics is encoded in the language and regards the context and situation (where and wnen) the communicative interaction takes place and how it develops. Leech and Thomas proposed the division of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in order to interrelate language users and their background knowledge. Extra-linguistic pragmatics overlaps both syntax and semantics as well as pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (from where it derives) and covers our conscious and sub-conscious knowledge of language. Seen and understood in this way, it has opened possibilities for more meticulous research. If syntax and semantics focus on *what is said*, and linguistic pragmatics on *what is communicated* (Kecskes personal correspondence), then the goal of extra-linguistic pragmatics is to describe, explain, and analyze *how what is said is communicated, and why.*

Pragmatics includes the knowledge of syntax and semantics and is context-based. Mey conceives three kinds of contexts which may be seen as a pyramid:

> • linguistic, the narrowest, where syntax and certain semantics function;
> • social, where the conversation takes place and shapes some further semantic background, such as the relation between communicators, their attitude, mood, setting, topic;
> • societal, the bottom of the pyramid, which includes both the first two and how they are institutionalized. It is here where education, religion, government, and home (i.e., culture) effect in a number of intricate respects how language users interact and communicate.

The study of language as a set of formal abstractions has been related to logic, mathematics and philosophy with no significant success. The

focus of modern linguistics instead, should be on the study of what happens in and during the communicative act. Pragmatics has moved from being a waste basket of linguistics to being its problem solver. In this respect, we must remember how and why sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, and other related new fields or sub-fields of language-study also emerged to solve aspects of language that formal linguistics alone could not. Pragmatics has been so helpful in providing answers to many questions that the above related fields had failed to give. As Wierzbicka (1991) proposes, there should be two kinds of pragmatics: a linguistic pragmatics and a non-linguistic pragmatics. The latter, with a plural sense, from which other new related branches of pragmatics should emerge, such as psycho pragmatics, and ethno pragmatics.

Pragmatics has adopted and adapted Austin and Searle's Speech act theory (SAT) to explain speakers´ and interlocutors' intentional forces and attitudes. A speech act is better defined as a communicative or linguistic act in order to include the written form of communication. The focus is on the illocutionary force of every communicative act as the detonator for communication. The perlocutionary force is the force that takes place when the listener "does" something prompted by, or as a consequence of, the speaker's illocutionary force. So much attention is given to the illocutinary force that the perlocutionary is relegated to imprecise or unclear terms when it is precisely through the perlocutionary force of a communicative act that the illocutionary one becomes identified. When a speech or communicative actor performs an utterance, it becomes one because of the reaction it causes on his or her interlocutor. Other than that, it is nothing. For example, a warning, or a threat, or any traditionally called language function, such as "Watch out!", becomes a warning . That is, it functions/works as such, only if it pushes an interlocutor to *do* something related to what he/she heard, even if his/her reaction is only "to answer" with a gesture that signals understanding. If nobody does anything, the illocutionary force loses all its force and its intentionality of meaning (of pragmatic meaning or any meaning at all). It happens very frequently, for example, that one says "Hello!", and the person who was greeted does not see the one who greeted him. Here, the illocutionary force is vanished. If it is answered by someone else and

that person reacts surprised or fails to recognize the utterer, then there is still communication, "misaimed" but not precisely mis-communicated, and we can say that the speaker's intention worked perlocutionarily. How can Pragmatics handle something like that? Why is the listener given so little importance?

Arens discusses Searle's SAT and, particularly, his conditions. He says that Wunderlich considers them inappropriate to a model of pragmatic analysis. When talking about interactional consequences and successful SAT, Arens discusses Wunderlich's point of view about speech acts similar to the ones above as

> "...consequences that are associated with the performance of initiative speech acts, those in which a *sequence* is established." In Wunderlich´s view "the illocutionary force of an utterance is situated in the way it affects the conditions governing interaction. This means that speech acts can be differentiated according to whether, as in the case of *initiative* speech acts, they introduce new conditions of interaction or, as in the case of *reactive* speech acts which conclude sequences, they either withdraw previously established conditions or fulfill existing ones."
> "... a semantic and a pragmatic analysis which combines both the subjective and objective factors. Within semantics, the "distinctive aspects of fundamental speech acts" can be clarified. (Arens, 56-57) (emphasis mine)

In the same line of thought, Arens further presents Wunderlich's three different requisites for those speech acts which introduce new conditions for the interaction to be successful. A summary of these follows:

> 1. understanding- the interlocutor or person addressed should know that the speaker is expressing a specific attitude once the speaker's intention is clear;
> 2. acceptance- the interlocutor should adopt an attitude, also according to the speaker's intention; and
> 3. fulfillment- both listener and speaker, depending on the nature of the speech act, should fulfill the condition(s) of interaction they are engaged in, once the condition(s) *per se* has been presented.

It should be clear that before communication starts, syntactic rules are known and shared by both participants for understanding to take place. Meaning at all levels is also shared. Then the pragmatic

principles of cooperation, turn-taking, and politeness begin to develop based on a mutual understanding and free will acceptance as part of the process of communication.

Syntax, semantics and pragmatics can be associated, all proportions and respect taken into account, to any triadic concept that begins with the religious trinity: the father, the son and the spirit. Linguisitics is the trinity as a whole where the father is semantics, the son is syntax and the spirit is pragmatics. Semantics is the one that can explain everything and give meaning; syntax conceived as structures, grammar, lexicon, sounds, intonation, is the means to understand and explain the meaning(s); and pragmatics, which makes semantics and syntax make sense, is the purpose(s), the end(s), that holds both semantics and syntax.

Humans are born with a communicative capacity to develop language(s). Language (linguistic knowledge) might be viewed as a half-a-circle which has some kind of transparent opening fan that goes out from the upper center, but that is held from its very bottom center and opens little by little as we are learning to use language, simultaneously opening the space of the circle with each part of the fan. The fan is pragmatic knowledge, which may be opening (growing) parallel to language development, although not necessarily, since it would depend on innumerable circumstances such as degree of intelligence, opportunities to socialize, education, family customs, religion, culture and many more. Language as a full circle stands for meaning, syntax develops within the fan as it is opening, very close at times and parallel to pragmatics, which provides syntax with meaning.

There are many aspects of language that cannot be explained but can be discussed from various scientific points of view. This paper is an example of what knowing a second language implies: to try to say what I mean and definitely meaning what I said (or wrote) under certain pragmatic principles of writing in American English and not knowing many others as a non-native language user.

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