



Electronic lectures on
Linguistics

Adapted from Yule's The Study
of Language

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Lecture 6

Pragmatics

1. Introduction: Beyond the Dictionary

Words have dictionary definitions (semantics), but in real life, we rarely mean exactly what we say. If a friend says, "The coffee is cold," they aren't just stating a temperature; they are likely complaining or asking for a fresh cup. Pragmatics is the study of intended speaker meaning—the "invisible" meaning that depends on the context.

2. Core Concepts

Context: Linguistic context (the words surrounding a phrase) and physical context (where and when the interaction occurs).

Deixis: "Pointing" via language. Words that cannot be interpreted without context (e.g., here, there, this, that, now, then, I, you, he).

Reference and Inference:

Reference: An act by which a speaker uses language to enable a listener to identify something (e.g., "The man with the hat").

Inference: The listener's process of using additional knowledge to interpret the reference (e.g., knowing who "the man with the hat" is).

Anaphora: The process of referring back to an entity using pronouns (e.g., "I saw a puppy. It was cute."). The puppy is the antecedent; "it" is the anaphor.

Presupposition: What the speaker assumes to be true before they even speak (e.g., "When did you stop smoking?" presupposes that you were smoking).

Speech Acts: The actions we perform by speaking:

Direct Speech Acts: "Close the door."

Indirect Speech Acts: "Could you close the door?" or "It's getting cold in here." (Politer/Socially softer).

Politeness: Face-saving acts. We use positive politeness (solidarity) and negative politeness (respecting distance/autonomy).

3. Key Discussion Points for Students

1. *Deixis:* How do digital messages (like a text saying "I'm here") create confusion regarding physical context and deixis?
2. *Indirect Speech Acts:* Why do we prefer indirectness in most social situations? What would happen to our social relationships if we were 100% direct all the time?
3. *Presupposition:* How can politicians or lawyers use presupposition to "trap" people into admitting things during an interview?

4. Critical Thinking Activity: The "Context Gap"

Provide students with a dialogue where the context is removed. For example: "It's on the table." Ask them to list 5 different scenarios (context) where this sentence would have a completely different meaning/function.

Lecture Supplement: Key Terms (Glossary)

Pragmatics: The study of speaker meaning and contextual interpretation.

Deixis: Expressions that rely on context for meaning (e.g., yesterday, me, there).

Speech Act: An action performed through utterance (e.g., requesting, promising, apologizing).

Face: The public self-image of a person in a social interaction.