

Pragmatics: From language as a sign system to language use

1. Introduction

In classical Greece and Rome, rhetoric and dialectics, the most popular studies of language, were concerned with persuasive speech making and argumentation. Besides this, and less popular, there was also a study of language concerned with the preservation of the Homeric epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. In the Alexandria grammar, (cf. Robins, 1997) this study developed into a full fledged morphologically based grammar, containing more or less the parts of speech and subcategories we still use in most of modern language descriptions. Two characteristics of this classical description were that (i) it was normative – the correct forms of the Homeric epics were to be preserved against the changes taking place in Alexandrian Koiné Greek and (ii) it was concerned with written language.

Over time, up until today, this type of grammar – a normative description of primarily the morphological characteristics of the written representations of a language, especially when complemented with a lexicon, has been seen as a way of capturing the essential features of a language. It was, and still is, the basis of both linguistic theorizing and language teaching in many countries of the world. Grammar (from the Greek *techné grammatiké*, the art of letters, i.e. writing), was seen as the core of a language and as an indispensable help to write, but also, somewhat surprisingly, to speak a language. If the use of language was studied at all, it was studied in the literary works of great writers and to some extent in rhetoric and dialectics.

Moving to the 20th century, there have been three main trends in linguistic research on language:

1. Historical linguistics – this trend has continued the traditions from the 19th century, when it was the dominant interest of linguists.
2. Structuralism – the main trend of the 20th century.
3. Communication, usage and function oriented studies of language – a minority trend.

Historical linguistics has had a constant but diminishing presence during the century, but has not really been the primary focus of interest for linguists. Especially not in the Saussure influenced tradition of “synchronic” linguistics (see below). Outside of linguistics, communication has been more widely studied, above all in the USA within the discipline of communication studies. In what follows, I will concentrate on the two last trends, starting with structuralism.

2. 20th century – structuralism including generativism

Perhaps the most influential view of language during the 20th century comes from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who, inspired by the social emergentism of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1895) and by Hegelian ideas of how identity can be given by a system of oppositions, conceived of language as a static network of syntagmatic and paradigmatic oppositions (de Saussure, 1916, 1959). The syntagmatic axis is made up of written (and in principle also spoken) language strings of

words that create a text, while the paradigmatic axis is made up of the set of (similarity based) associations, linked to every word in a syntagm, e.g. the set of words that could be substituted in a particular syntagmatic position. Inspired by Durkheim, Saussure furthermore proposed to distinguish between the biologically given “faculty of Language” (faculté de langage), giving rise to an underlying social system of language, which he called “langue” and its realization in individual acts of speaking, which he called “parole”. He also proposed that it is “langue” which is the proper object of study of linguistics. Even though “langue” is a fairly abstract system, it is not Platonic in nature but social in the sense of Durkheim, i.e. not reducible to properties or activities of individuals but sui generis social. Saussure then added to the trichotomy between “langage”, “langue” and “parole” a distinction between a synchronic (at a given point in time) and a diachronic (or historical) study of language and suggested that synchronically we could regard language as a social static system (langue). This enables us to think of language diachronically as a series of changes between synchronic systems. Synchronic language descriptions in this way become a basis for diachronic descriptions and are therefore presupposed by diachronic descriptions.

A consequence of the Saussurean conception of language as a social static system (langue) is that the traditional grammar and non-communication oriented view of language was reinforced. Language could be seen as a static system of signs organized syntagmatically and paradigmatically. In fact, Saussure’s conception of language as a synchronic description of the irreducible social system of “langue”, in opposition to the variation in “parole”, also politically helped to strengthen the normative abstraction and idealization of a cultivated national language devoid of variation in terms of dialects, age, gender or social activities and, in this way, supported or at least was compatible with the cultivation and construction of nationally homogeneous states.

Many of the features of the view of language promoted by the Saussurean concepts of “langue”, “synchrony” and “system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic oppositions” were supported and strengthened by the structuralist movement in linguistics which roughly speaking can be divided into North American (USA) structuralism and European structuralism.

American structuralism has as its leading proponents Leonard Bloomfield (Bloomfield, 1933), Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager (Bloch and Trager, 1942) and Zellig Harris (Harris, 1951) and is oriented to “expression” side of language rather than meaning and empirical data rather than theory, focusing on field work and distribution analysis in the areas of phonology and morphology with very little time for meaning and semantics. American structuralism was simultaneous with and harmonious with the Behaviorist school in psychology, which like American linguistic structuralism was very empiricist, in its perspective on how scientific studies should be pursued, represented, for example, by B. F. Skinner in his widely read book “Verbal behavior” (Skinner, 1957).

Even though the American structuralist movement was dominant in the USA, there were also other voices less in harmony with the expression oriented empiricism of the American structuralists. Two such voices were Edward Sapir (1921) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1942), who both, in the tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Franz Boas, were more open to the content side of language and its connection with culture and cognition.

European structuralism, following Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), had as its leading proponents Louis Hjelmslev in Denmark (1928/1929, 1943), Roman Jakobson (1960, 1971) and Wilhelm Mathesius (1929) and the Prague School. In contrast to the empiricism of the American structuralism, European structuralism is theoretical, more abstract and more open to an analysis also of the content side of language. Especially the work of Hjelmslev (Hjelmslev, 1943) is relevant in this connection, since he reinforced and in many ways clarified the abstract view of language as a sign system based on oppositions that had been suggested by Saussure. Drawing on the Danish linguist Jespersen, Hjelmslev added to the Saussurean structuralist approach a clearer distinction between the “expression” and “content” of a linguistic sign, by connecting it to an Aristotle inspired distinction between the “form” and the “substance” of a sign. Although mainly working on phonology, **also** the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, in his proposal of an account of the functions of language (referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic and meta-lingual), **NO ALSO HERE** showed an openness to the content side of language. As in America, the European continental structuralists can be seen in contrast to other contemporaneous schools of linguistics. One important such school was the functional type of linguistics, which was developing in Great Britain with Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), Alan Gardiner (1932) and John Rupert Firth (1957). As in the USA with Sapir and Whorf, here the content side of language was connected to cognition and culture, albeit in a different more functional and less epistemological and ontological way than in the USA.

According to both Saussure and Hjelmslev, every linguistic sign is the result of a two-place relation, where there is an “arbitrary connection” between a signifier (expression) and something signified (its content). In contradistinction to Saussure, who thought the substance was basically psychological, Hjelmslev did not think linguistics should take a stand on the nature of the “substance”, neither of the expression nor of the content of the linguistic sign. Both expression and content had “form” and “substance” but linguistics should only be concerned with the form of both the content and expression of the signs, leaving the investigation of the substance to other sciences. In this way, Hjelmslev, among other things, hoped to bring about a rapprochement between linguistics and mathematics (his father was a professor of mathematics) and to create in linguistics a study of the “algebra of language” dealing only with the forms of language.

Thus, through the distinction between “form” and “substance”, the view of the linguistic sign and of language promoted by Hjelmslev takes another step towards abstraction and decontextualization – in its essence, language is form, not substance. Linguistics should be concerned with language as an abstract system of disembodied and decontextualized signs.

Outside of linguistics, another source of the non-communication oriented view of language comes from the descriptions of language and grammar developed in logic and mathematics during the 20:th century. Usually, in such descriptions the conception of grammar as a normative written language description is taken for granted. A consequence of this is that a language here often is conceptualized as a set of well-formed discrete strings of (discrete written) signs. The conceptualization presupposes and becomes plausible against a background of reflecting on language as a set of grammatical sentences made up of word-like signs. This perspective is often very clear,

if we open a text book in mathematical linguistics or formal semantics, e.g. Grishman (1986), writes "Formally, a language is a set of sentences, where each sentence is a string of one or more symbols (by symbol Grishman means words) from the vocabulary of the language". The quote reflects a view of language, which really only allows for a study of syntax, morphology and possibly for graphemics, since content and function are not taken into consideration.

Language is seen as a set of sentences, consisting of sequences of discrete symbols. In most of these formal accounts, the use of language as a medium of communicative interaction, in which non-discrete phenomena like prosody and gesture play a crucial role, is not seriously considered or even noticed. Rather, with inspiration from writing, language is seen as an abstract set of rules for manipulating well-formed strings of discrete signs.

At the side of the formal tradition, partly reinforcing it, there was a majority of linguists, who were becoming structuralists in the tradition of Saussure, Bloomfield, Hjelmslev and Jakobson (Jakobson, 1971). These linguists were, on the one hand, developing the structuralist theory of language, the clearest example of this being Louis Hjelmslev (1928/1929, 1943) and the glossematic approach to linguistic theory being developed in Copenhagen. On the other hand, others, mainly in the USA, were developing the empirical methods for studying language and here the clearest examples are probably Bloch and Trager (1942) as well as Zellig Harris (1951), where the latter exemplifies how an empiricist approach can also be dealt with formally and mathematically.

Generative syntax

In the 1950s, the structuralist tradition took a new turn through the work of Noam Chomsky (1957) who took as his point of departure the syntactic description of a language, proposing to describe this with the kind of rewrite rules proposed by Emile Post (1944) and earlier by Henrik Abel (1881) in mathematics.

Like Hjelmslev, Chomsky, thus, suggested a mathematization of linguistics, and in an elegant way demonstrated how his approach could be used to give an elegant, precise description of several syntactic constructions in English (passive, negation, interrogatives) (cf. Chomsky, 1957).

In 1959, Chomsky broadened his approach to language by publishing a very influential critical review of B. F. Skinner's "Verbal Behavior" (Skinner, 1957). In this review, Chomsky criticized the empiricist approach of Skinner for being largely vacuous and being unable to account for a child's acquisition of complex grammatical rules.

In the books "Aspects of a Theory of Syntax" and "Cartesian Linguistics" which appeared in 1965 and 1966, Chomsky elaborated his proposals from 1957 and his critique of behaviorism from 1959 by proposing a framework for linguistic theory, which became known under the names of "generative grammar" or "transformational grammar". In this framework, Chomsky suggested that the formal rules of phrase structure produced so called "deep structures", which, via transformational rules, produced the actual "surface structure" of sentences in a language. He suggested that these formal rules formed the essential core of a language, its grammar, which in turn could be said to

capture the linguistic “competence” of an “ideal speaker-listener”. This competence could then be contrasted with actual linguistic “performance”, which for various reasons like fatigue, illness, memory limitations might contain “incompetent behavior” i.e. behavior not directly reflecting the ideal “linguistic competence”.

In line with the anti-empiricist, rationalist tradition of Descartes, Chomsky also suggested (Chomsky, 1966) that the inadequacies of the empiricist-behaviorist approach to language acquisition exemplified in Skinner’s “Verbal Behavior” could only be remedied by engaging in a more philosophically rationalist approach making use of “innate ideas” and relying on an inborn language instinct or as Chomsky called it “language acquisition device” (LAD). Since all human children can learn all human languages in spite of the extensive typological differences between human languages, this language acquisition device contains the potential for a universal grammatical core of all human languages, often referred to as “universal grammar”.

The Chomskyan views have, in general, supported an abstract decontextualized view of language. Chomsky’s notion of “competence” cannot be identified with an underlying, social reality like Saussure’s “langue” nor can it be identified with actual genetic, neurological or psychological models of linguistic competence, since it concerns an abstract model of the grammatical principles of an “ideal speaker-hearer”. It is perhaps not so strange that some of Chomsky’s followers and perhaps Chomsky himself at times have espoused a Platonic approach to language, see Chomsky’s discussion of Plato’s problem, Chomsky (1986), or Fodor’s discussion of the nature of the “language of thought” in Fodor (1975).

Even if American structuralism was criticized by Noam Chomsky for being too empiricist and non-theoretical, Chomsky was more tolerant of European structuralism. In fact, the methodological goals of Chomsky and Hjelmslev were rather similar, aiming at a mathematical account of language structure. This means that, in a wide sense, generativism can be seen as a part of the structuralist movement in linguistics.

The decontextualized view of language and of the linguistic sign was further reinforced by another feature of the analysis. In Saussure and Hjelmslev as well as in Chomsky, in both the structuralist and generativist movements, the nature of the linguistic sign was assumed to be a two-place relation between a signifier (expression) and something signified (content), with no consideration of the user or context and their respective influence on either expression (signifier) or content (signified). However, this view was not generally shared but in fact already before the rise of structuralism and generativism challenged by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914).

3. Peirce and formal semantics

The Saussurean/Hjelmslevian structuralist view of the nature of the sign stands in contrast to the view suggested by Charles Sanders Peirce in a series of papers from 1868 to 1914 (cf. Peirce, 1940).

In the Peircean analysis, all types of signs are three-place, not two-place. The two-place relation between signifier and signified is always mediated by a relation to the sign user, who can be a sign producer or sign perceiver. The sign user creates the sign by creating

a mental representation (“interpretant”), connecting the signifier (“representamen”) with the signified (“object”). This analysis of the sign, thus, makes it crucially dependent on the sign user and in this way prepares the ground for the current wide spread interest in communication and pragmatics (see below).

Peirce further distinguished three types of signs (**symbol, icon, index**) depending on the type of representing link (interpretant) the sign user uses to connect the representamen (the signifier) with what is signified or represented (the object):

On the Peircean analysis, language is a semiotic system, primarily involving linguistic symbols, which are constituted by users. This view of language is, thus, less disembodied and less decontextualized than the views of Saussure, Hjelmslev and Chomsky that we have discussed above, and for this reason, also more open to considering the role of language in communication.

Inspired by Peirce, Charles Morris, in 1938, (Morris,1938) proposed that any sign system could be studied from the three points of view suggested by the Peircean three-place relation analysis of signs

1. “Syntax” – If we restrict our study to relations between the signifiers or **representamens**, we are studying the “syntax” of the system.
2. “Semantics” – If we include the relation between signifiers and what is signified - the object (between representations and what is represented), we are studying the “semantics” of the system (the sign system as a two-place system).
3. “Pragmatics” – If we include not only the relation between signifiers and signified, but also the relation to the users, i.e., the relation between the representations, what is represented and the interpretants, we are studying the “pragmatics” of the system (the sign system as a three-place system).

The proposal made by Charles Morris only gradually became noticed and used. One of the first persons to use it was Rudolf Carnap, who in the 1930s (cf. Carnap, 1942), through Gödel’s incompleteness theorem for logic and the work on semantics by Alfred Tarski, had become convinced that formal systems could not be studied merely syntactically, but had to also involve a semantics. Later in the 1950:s, Carnap further became convinced that, in fact, including a semantics, was also insufficient, so that a pragmatics had to be included as well (cf. Carnap, 1959).

4. Pragmatics

In general, the necessity to include the use of language in communication in the theoretical analysis of language became accepted within the philosophical study of language in the 1950s and 1960s, where we find the appearance of body of work on language, which is clearly pragmatic in nature. Three very influential examples of this are Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1953) “Philosophical Investigations” and John Langshaw Austin’s (1962) “How to do things with words” as well as Paul Grice’s 1967 William James Lectures, partly published in Grice (1975).

It is interesting that, in general, the tradition of formal semantics, which, unlike mathematical linguistics, often was influenced by the same sources as Carnap, first became convinced that semantics was indispensable in the description of a language,

and then in the late 1950:s and 1960:s also became convinced that aspects of context, i.e., pragmatics, had to be included in the formal description of language, especially for the description of deixis, cf. Bar-Hillel (1954) and Montague (1968, 1970a). Perhaps the most important contribution here was made by Richard Montague, who in his papers giving formal syntactic and semantic descriptions of formal and natural languages (cf. Montague, 1974) followed Bar-Hillel's suggestions and included pragmatics in the form of spatio-temporal coordinates (indices), used to assign referents and truth values, especially to sentences containing deictic and temporal expressions.

Note here that the introduction of context, in the form of spatio-temporal coordinates, to give a more complete account of truth conditions and inference does not mean that a study of the role of language in interaction or communication is introduced. Context is merely conceptualized as a set of parameters or indices (see Lewis, 1970 and 1983, for a well known example of this), that are used to determine reference and truth and no consideration is taken of multimodality or the dynamics of dialog.

In linguistics the "pragmatic turn" was gradually introduced in the 1970:s and 1980:s, following what might be called the "syntactic turn" championed by Chomsky and the generativist school and the "semantic turn" championed by Montague (1974) as well as so called "generative semantics, advocated by scholars such as MacCawley (1976), Lakoff (1969) and Jackendoff (1976).

Several different perspectives on pragmatics were represented. Compare the following definitions given of pragmatics:

- Allwood (1976)

Allwood, in 1976, characterizes pragmatics the following way (Allwood 1976: 173):

"Pragmatics could be viewed as the study of the factors which determine what information is actually communicated by a sender and apprehended by a receiver; the different communicative intentions, purposes, motives and reasons; the different ways in which a receiver can react to information; the relationship between sender intention, receiver reaction and other psychological and sociological phenomena, such as systems of emotions and attitudes (including cognitive ones) and phenomena like social structure, role relations, power and solidarity.

Further, it should study the relationship between conventional content and the intended content of a sender or the apprehended content of a receiver. It should determine to what extent this relationship is dependent on various contextual factors such as shared background assumptions. It should study how such dependence on pragmatic factors affects the phonology, morphology, syntax, content and purpose of the utterances expressed and apprehended.

Finally, it should determine in greater detail the strategies, conventional and non-conventional norms that govern communicative interaction."

Allwood then further elaborated the consequences of this characterization/definition in Allwood (1978) and in 1981, in addition, argues that actually there is no good pre-theoretical, non-stipulative grounds for the distinction between semantics and

pragmatics, since all ways of trying to delimit semantics turn out to presuppose so called pragmatic factors.

- Levinson (1983)

Levinson discusses several possible definitions of pragmatics like the following:

(i) "Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized or encoded in the structure of a language". (Page 9)

(ii) "Pragmatics is the study of those of all those aspects of meaning not captured in a semantic theory"(Page 12)

(iii) "Pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding". (Page 21)

(iv) "Pragmatics is the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate"(Page 24)

(v) "Pragmatics is the study of deixis (at least in part), implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse structure"(Page 24)

Basically, Levinson's definitions (i), (iii) and (iv) are compatible with and foreshadowed by Allwood's characterization of pragmatics from 1976. Levinson, himself however, has a weak preference for definition (ii) but does not press the point. The weak point of this definition is that it is dependent on giving semantics a definition that is independent of the definition of pragmatics. As is discussed in Allwood (1981), this is not possible if we define semantics as being concerned with truth conditions or conventional meaning, the two primary candidates, leading to the consequence that semantics and pragmatics cannot really be theoretically distinguished. As Levinson points out, we can then retreat to definition (v), which is not really a definition but a stipulative list of phenomena that we should regard as pragmatic.

- Leech (1983)

Geoffrey Leech (1983), the same year as Levinson's book "pragmatics", defines pragmatics the following way:

(i) "Pragmatics is the study of meaning in relation to speech situations (p. 6, p. 15) and

(ii) "Pragmatics – the principles of language use" (p. 4).

We can see that both of these definitions are less specific than the definitions/characterizations provided by Allwood and Levinson. The first definition runs into the same problems as Levinson's definition (ii). It is dependent on there being enough substantial aspects of meaning that can be studied without a relation to speech situations. The second definition includes all aspects of language use and therefore means that pragmatics cannot be an aspect of language in the same sense as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

- Mey (1993: 42)

Ten years later, Jakob Mey defines pragmatics the following way:

"Pragmatics is the study of the conditions of human language uses as these are determined by the context of society".

In addition, Mey wants to distinguish two types of context

(i) Societal context (determined by societies, institutions)

(ii) Social context created in interaction

Given this definition, one wonders if not all properties of a given language; phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic are to some extent determined by the society in which the language occurs, so that pragmatics becomes the study of the social conditions of any aspect of language. It also seems that the definition relates pragmatics more to contexts of type one, i.e. macro-social factors than to contexts of type two, i.e. micro-social factors, which would have the consequence that pragmatics would be more or less co-extensional with socio-linguistics. Later Mey develops his societal view of Pragmatics further into an interdisciplinary study (see Mey, 2016).

- Verschueren (1995: 19)

Jef Verschueren comes fairly close to Mey's view, when he says that pragmatics should be seen as a functional perspective on language: "Pragmatics as a general functional perspective on (any aspect of) language, i.e., as an approach to language which takes into account the full complexity of its cognitive, social, and cultural (i.e. 'meaningful') functioning in the lives of human beings."

Neither Mey nor Verschueren see pragmatics as a component to be added to linguistic theory, following syntax and semantics. Rather they see it as a perspective through which any aspect of language can be studied; in Mey's case the societal conditions and in Verschueren's the functions the aspect has.

- Neo-Gricean approaches

Sometimes scholars like Sperber and Wilson (1986), Levinson (2000) and Horn (2004) are referred to as "Neo-Gricean". What these scholars have in common is that they take the conversational maxims used by Paul Grice (see Grice, 1975) to characterize rational communication as a starting point for a more general pragmatic approach to language. Since the approaches all rely on some notion of "literal meaning", while disagreeing on what is required to reach to actual meaning in communication, they all run into the problems related to trying to clarify what "literal meaning" is, seen already above in relation to approaches of Levinson (1983) and Leech (1983),

To summarize, we can see that all the definitions and characterizations agree that pragmatics is essentially concerned with the way language, especially meaning interacts with context. But there is no agreement about what aspects of meaning and context this concerns, or about how to draw the line between semantics and pragmatics or, indeed, about whether there is a substantial such line to be drawn. Maybe one can venture to say that the "pragmatic turn" has meant that pragmatically sensitized linguists have abandoned the structuralist credo that language essentially involves a two-place relation between expression and content (form and meaning) in favor of the idea that the analysis of language always involves a three-place relation between expression, content and context and that this relation should be studied by focusing on language use rather than on language seen as a static system.

5. Non-structuralist Linguistics

Structuralism, especially including generativism, and later pragmatism have been the dominant schools of 20:th century linguistics but the general development has been more complicated and different schools have been competing with each other. While in the first half of the century the majority of linguists were engaged in historical or structuralist linguistics, there was also a minority of linguists who saw language as connected with context and to some extent with communication. This minority was most strongly represented in Britain where Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), who was an anthropologist, Alan Gardiner (1932) and John Rupert Firth (1957) (later continued by Michael Halliday (1973), all published work in the 1920s and 1930s stressing the role of context.

In the early 20:th century, an attempt at a use oriented linguistics was made by Alan Gardiner (1932) in Great Britain and later by J. R. Firth and Michael Halliday. In Germany, the psychologist Karl Bühler presented a communication oriented view of language (Bühler, 1934).

One of the ideas of J. R. Firth was that national languages were to some extent an artificial creation and that a language instead should be viewed as a collection of registers (or genres), capturing the linguistic practices of particular activities and organizations. In such a view, context plays an important role in determining the conditions for the register to appear and stabilize.

Besides these use-oriented studies of language, the Alexandria grammatical tradition, all the time, has been a major influence on studies of language from antiquity until today. This influence has had two features that have prevented linguistics from becoming an empirical science of linguistic communication.

- (i) a normative focus and
- (ii) a focus on written language

Both features have been preserved through the centuries and appear-again in 20:th century linguistic structuralism, as promoted by linguists like Saussure, Bloomfield, Hjelmslev, Jakobson and Chomsky, even though they have often paid "lip service" to empirical descriptivism. Chomsky's interest in the "competence" of the ideal speaker-listener, in contrast with the actual behavior (performance) of the speaker-listener, is, for example, completely normative, in its classification of linguistic expressions into "grammatical and "ungrammatical". It also relies a lot on written language since our intuitions of "grammaticality" are clearer for written language than for multimodal face-to-face interaction. The same is true (although in slightly milder form) for linguists who believe that their object of study is something akin to the Saussurean notion of "langue" which they believe should be distinguished from actual use "parole" in which the norms of "langue" (often identified with the norms of a national language, see Harris (1980)) are not always upheld.

The written language bias is more implicit but can also be seen in how the choice of examples and empirical data, in both structuralist and generativist linguistics, usually does not focus on the use of authentic language in communication, but instead uses constructed examples highlighting various systemic features of language, which are usually most clearly apparent in written language (cf. also Linell 2005).

Added to the focus on rules and focus on written language, there is also an additional feature of abstraction leading to disembodiment and decontextualization. This is the result of identifying the object of study of linguistics with either the Saussurean doctrine of langue as separated from parole, the Hjelmslevian conception of form as separated from substance or the Chomskyan idea of an idealized competence as separated from actual performance. In all these approaches, actual linguistic data from real interaction can be seen as of secondary interest, to be superseded by a more abstract notion of language.

Linguistics was dominated by this abstract conception of language, in the 1960s and 1970s. However, beginning in the 1970s, and with increasing strength in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a shift of focus, so that it gradually began to discover the two other aspects of Morris' trichotomy, semantics and pragmatics. Besides the English Firthian tradition, movements like cognitive semantics, the linguistic pragmatic tradition and the sociological school of conversation analysis (CA) start to have an influence.

One important reason for the gradual shift away from a focus on language as an abstract system is the gradual discovery of the philosophical texts on language from the 1950s and 1960s.

A second reason is the new availability of first, analog recording technology, and then of digital recording technology. Both of these types of recording make it possible to seriously record, transcribe and store data in the form of corpora and linguistic data bases which then can be used to study language as an instrument of face-to-face communication. The richness of the new types of data makes it possible to study both collective patterns of language use and more individualistic idiosyncratic ways of using language, for which existing models of language still, generally, have no clear role.

A third reason is the critical theoretical discussion within linguistics, which increasingly, like earlier in philosophy and logic, calls into question the possibility of pursuing an adequate description and explanation of language, from a purely syntactic point of view. Language, after all, exists to share meaning, so a syntactic description necessitates a semantic description that in turn leads to pragmatic description. Thus, following on the acceptance of semantics, a next step is to show that a syntactic and semantic description and explanation of language is not possible without taking context and language users into account, which means that neither syntax nor semantics can be pursued without pragmatics. For other more radical criticism of the idea of describing a language, cf. Harris (1981, 1982) and Baker and Hacker (1984). In this way, it seems as if a majority of linguists gradually are moving from a view of language as an abstract and decontextualized system to an appreciation of language as an instrument for communication. However, what this means has been interpreted in several different ways.

6. The relationship of pragmatics to context

Even if there has been a gradual realization of the role of context for language, one problem is that the conceptions of context have not been the same. The appreciation of the role of context for language has taken several different routes. One way to gain an appreciation of the routes that have been taken is to use the definition of a sign provided

by Peirce, in combination with the characterization of the aspects of a sign system suggested by Morris (syntax, semantics and pragmatics) as a starting point to capture the different conceptions of context. The basic idea is to go from the user dependence of the constitution of the sign claimed by Peirce to a more general notion of a context dependence of the sign. In this way, we can basically distinguish three different approaches to context, while also being aware that some of the approaches combine several of these three types of context. Using the terminology suggested by Peirce, we can distinguish the following types of context:

1. The context of the representamen - syntax
2. The context of the object - semantics
3. The context of the interpretant – pragmatics
4. Combining all of the three above types and perhaps adding other aspects

6.1 The context of the representamen (the signifiers)

This is the original sense of context, namely, that of the accompanying text. Investigating context in this sense, we consider how a linguistic element (phoneme, morpheme, word, sentence, text) is influenced by the linguistic elements surrounding it. This is the context of signifiers given by their syntagmatic surroundings. For example, this is the notion of context, usually involved, when in translation we need a context to give the proper translation. For instance, if we want to translate the English verb “know “ to German, we need to have information if the context is that of “knowing the answer” or that of “knowing a language” or yet something else. The translation will depend on what the context is.

This notion of context, over time, became broader and broader and was eventually used in the sense of “extra-linguistic context”, so some authors felt the need to reintroduce the original notion by creating a distinction between “context” and “co-text”, where “context” was given a vague, wider and basically undefined sense while “co-text” reintroduced the original text based notion (cf. Catford, 1969).

It is this text based notion of context that first becomes popular in linguistics, where it appears, for example, in the movement of “text linguistics” which was popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Harweg, 1968; Petöfi, 1971; Van Dijk, 1972; Enkvist, 1976; Halliday and Hassan, 1985).

In a wide sense, the representamen based notion of context is also present in “multimodal communication”, i.e. communication employing more than one sensory modality, where we can regard body language and prosody as context for speech or pictures as context for text. In line with the Peircean starting point, we are now considering all accompanying representamens and since gestures and prosody qualify as such representamens, we can now abandon and extend the representamen based notion of context merely as “accompanying text”.

6.2 The context of the object (the signified)

The context of the object is the semantic notion of context. This is the notion of context that formal language philosophers discovered was necessary, to get around the purely

syntactic approaches to language. Here context is used to assign reference and truth conditions to the expressions of a language. In practice, the language considered was usually a formal language that was gradually being made more sophisticated by incorporating new features from natural language. Clear examples of such incorporated features are deixis, tense, pronouns and modal expressions (in a different sense of modality than sensory modality). For example, in order to give an interpretation of the reference and truth conditions of the sentence "I was hungry", we need to know who said it, and when it was said. For this, contextual information is needed. Without this contextual information, we will not know what proposition was expressed and no inferences can be drawn from the sentence.

One may of course be skeptical of this approach, since it indeed is artificial and does not do justice to the real complexity of natural language. The question is whether the austere ideal of conceptual clarity, which was espoused by Carnap and others working in formal semantics really is compatible with a consideration of the real complexity of natural language. At present, at least, the alternatives seem to be an imprecise theory, doing justice to the complexity of linguistic communication or a more precise theory, which does not do justice to this complexity.

In Bar-Hillel (1954), it was suggested that the distinction between "pure" and "descriptive" should also apply to pragmatics and so pure or "formal pragmatics" was conceived. Carnap and Morris later both concurred with this proposal (Schillp, 1963; Morris, 1971).

We can see that the semantic conception of context is fairly different from the conception of context as accompanying representamens (signifiers). Here we are instead focusing on what is signified conceptualized as objects, indices, possible worlds or sets of believed propositions.

6.3 The context of the interpretant (the user)

The third type of context brings us to the "interpretant" which is the interpretation given by the user of a particular signifier (representamen) in terms of the object it signifies (the signified). We thus arrive at the context of the user and by extension also at the context of usage. This is the pragmatic notion of context, i.e., the notion of context that invites us to study language in use, to study the functions of language, no matter whether they are given by accompanying signifiers or by the need to identify truth conditions and reference (propositions).

The notion thus also opens up for a consideration of other contextual factors than accompanying signifiers, truth conditions and reference determining possible worlds, indices or propositional beliefs. Now contextual factors can include for example culture and social activity, since these factors can influence how a user interprets and in other ways uses language.

This is the notion we see employed in the Malinovski-Firthian tradition, in Halliday (1973), Levinson (1979), Allwood (1976), sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, intercultural communication, communication studies and computer based dialog systems.

It is also a notion of context, which allows inclusion of the syntactic and semantic notions of context which then become dimensions in a more inclusive notion of context.

What the gradual acceptance of the pragmatic more inclusive notion of context means is that, in a sense, the interests that were most popular in ancient Greece, rhetoric and dialectics, are being reinstated and that dialog and communication increasingly are seen as central phenomena for an understanding of the nature of language (see Hundsnurscher, 1980, Weigand, 1989/2003 and 2009).

A second type of classification makes a distinction between (i) the context of communicative action, (ii) the context of other actions simultaneous with communication, (iii) the social activity that both types of action are part of and (iv) the cognitive content (e.g. beliefs, values) that is activated from memory by the actions and activities mentioned in (i), (ii) and (iii), cf. also Allwood (1995).

7. Post-structuralist linguistics

By the 1960s, computers and recording technology had made possible the collecting and establishing of corpora of different types of language. This trend has continued and over the past fifty years an increasing number of corpora of different registers and genres have appeared, see, for example, the corpora collected by Randolph Quirk, Jan Svartvik and Sidney Greenbaum (cf. Svartvik and Quirk, 1980). Most of these corpora have been oriented to written language like Sinclair's COBUILD, cf. Moon (2009), but some have attempted to capture also spoken language, like the British National Corpus (BNC) (cf. Leech and Nicholas, 2000) and to some extent Sinclair's COBUILD or only spoken language like the Gothenburg Spoken Language Corpus (GSLC) (Allwood, Björnberg, Grönqvist, Ahlsén and Ottesjö, 2000).

The appearance of these corpora has meant that language now could be studied with a basis in what Saussure called "parole" and Chomsky called "performance", that is in actual concrete linguistic usage data, rather than in idealized accounts of language as an abstract system of signs.

Above all, the appearance of corpora has made possible observation of individual language use in communication and descriptive statistics on how different linguistics expressions are actually used.

During the last decade, linguistic corpora have increasingly become video based, making possible the establishment of multimodal corpora, allowing for studies of the simultaneous multimodal interaction of gestures (in the sense of informative body movements), prosody and vocal verbal elements.

So, even if the development of linguistics has been greatly influenced by the philosophical discussions of the nature of language and communication, it has also been influenced by communication-oriented research in sociology, anthropology and communication science. Particularly important has been the influence from the school of sociology called Conversation Analysis (CA) (see, for example, Sacks, 1992 and Sacks,

Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), which has led to a much greater interest in interaction and communication in linguistics. However, the focus only on transcriptions of authentic data by CA, without taking the context into account has met with criticism from many scholars, see e.g. Allwood (1976), Hundsnurscher (1980) or Weigand (1989/2003).

Strangely enough, the influence in linguistics from the field of communication studies, which have been very popular, especially in the USA, although highly relevant, has, so far, been much smaller. Perhaps because of the status of formalized accounts in linguistics, a somewhat stronger influence has come from computer simulation of multimodal communication and the construction of artificial dialog systems.

All of these influences are slowly forcing a reconceptualization of the nature of language from being essentially based on a normative version of written language captured in concepts like “langue”, “form” or “competence” to a conception of language as being an empirical phenomenon, essentially multimodal, involving, besides vocal verbal (or written) elements, also prosody and gestures, with the primary function of language being a medium of both communicative interaction and thinking in different social activities, sensitive to the needs of different types of users.

8. Outlook

Based on the discussion above, it might now be possible to point to the following possible developments in contemporary linguistics for the three subfields we distinguished in the introduction:

1. Historical linguistics

Historical linguistics has for long been an important part of linguistics and will, in all likelihood, continue to be so. It is successively incorporating and providing a historical perspective on new aspects of language, like cognitive semantics, pragmatics as well as on more communication and dialog oriented studies. It is also making an increasingly extensive use of the historical linguistic corpora that are becoming available.

2. Structuralism (including generativism)

Due to the availability of corpora of actual linguistic data and the theoretical needs of various practical concerns involving language use, even though structuralism has been the dominant approach during the 20:th century, it will probably become less dominant. However, structuralist linguistics will still be pursued, for traditional linguistic research but also probably in connection with new attempts to provide formal “mathematical” models of language.

3. Communication, usage and function oriented studies of language:

The “pragmatic turn” and the growing popularity of communication and cognition oriented studies, inside and outside of linguistics, often pursued in an interdisciplinary way, combined with cognitive science and studies of corpora, experimental methods and computer simulation, has meant that this type of linguistics is slowly becoming the most common type. The field will probably over time see a theoretical discussion between more cognitive approaches, like cognitive linguistics, cognitive semantics etc. and more communication, interaction and dialog oriented approaches, like interactional linguistics or dialog oriented linguistics. Hopefully leading to new insights, and resulting in new

proposals for how to bridge this gap between interaction and cognition related approaches.

In general, because of the new availability of ways to capture linguistic interaction, linguistics is becoming more of a full-fledged empirical science where theories and descriptive accounts can be tested against empirical data in much the same manner as they can in other ways of studying human activity.

This means that there can be room both for intensive qualitative case studies (both experimental and with more ecological validity) of what communicative means (content and expression) are involved in particular instances of communication in particular social activities and for more extensive quantitative, corpus based descriptions and statistical analyses of aspects of collective language use. It also means that there can be place for inductive as well as abductive and deductive building of a theory of communication, cognition and language, which has the power to provide descriptions and explanations of human employment of language (linguaging) in cognition and communication in different social activities and cultures.

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