Pragmatics: a hybrid innovation

Leila Najeh
University of Sfax, Tunisia

Abstract

My original intention is to prove that pragmatics is a ‘hybrid’ innovation. It grew out of three distinct branches of knowledge: rhetoric, semiotics and functional linguistics. My assumption draws on three simple observations: (i) many rhetorical concepts, like topoi, inference and argumentation, are pragmatically tackled, (ii) many works document a palpable influence of Aristotelian rhetoric in pragmatic researches (Tyteca & Perlman, 1992; Anscombe, 1995; Ducrot & Anscombe, 1997), and (iii) other works, always, put pragmatics at the cross of disciplines (Eemeren et al, 1986).

The article provides a panoramic survey of pragmatics. Its main issue is to contribute to the understanding of the interface between pragmatics and surrounding disciplines, mainly rhetoric, functional linguistics and semiotics.

Key words: pragmatics, rhetoric, semiotics, functional linguistics, speech act theory.
1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a developing field of inquiry which since its emergence in the last century has received an incessant interest, owing to three major reasons.

- It outlines a holistic approach to language questioning lexical, semantic and syntactic abstract analyses. The pioneering works (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996; Yule, 2010) are commonly recognized as a starting point of investigations in the area of pragmatics. The common interest of these works is to indicate some problems of language understanding which cannot be handled with the semantic, lexical and syntactic tools and stressed then the need to solve them other way.
- Old disciplines, like rhetoric and logic, interact with pragmatics though it is well defined as a linguistic question (Dascal & Gross, 1999; Koszowy, 2010).
- Developing disciplines, too, like semiotics and discourse analysis are integrated in pragmatics (Coreen, 2008; Brown, 1988).

In this context, this article is going to show that pragmatics developed in the matrix of rhetoric, semiotics and linguistics. To achieve such a purpose, a historical and conceptual sketch will be outlined; also a comparison between pragmatics and such disciplines is thought to be relevant to the major claim of the paper.

2. Preliminary remarks

a. To begin with: What pragmatics is about

It is a commonplace that pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which is in turn well defined as a scientific study of language (De Saussure, 1995, p.6). The direct requirement of this axiom is that pragmatics is a scientific study of language. But due to the fact that surrounding disciplines mainly rhetoric and semiotics have a significant influence on pragmatics (Morris, 1938; Perlman & Tyteca, 1992), such definition does not cover all sides of pragmatics. In the narrower sense, pragmatics is the study of language usage in a context. Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as follow:

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). It has, consequently, more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning this type of study necessarily involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said. It requires a consideration of how speakers organizes what they want to say in accordance with who they are talking to, where, when, and under what circumstances. Pragmatics is the study of the contextual meaning (p.3).
Also, following Yule (1996) and others (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 2009; Yule, 2010), pragmatics is based on four postulates:

- Language is much more than abstraction and formal system. It is much more than lists of grammar rules and list of terms correspond to list things (De Saussure, 1995, p.56). In pragmatics, language is seen a concrete object used in a real context (Levinson, 1983, p.7).
- Semantic and syntactic analysis (Levinson, 1983, pp.251-261) bring about fuzzy and invisible meanings (Yule, 1996, p.3; Yule, 2010, p.128). It is the concern of pragmatics to get to the bottom and the depth of meaning (Yule, 2010, p.128).
- Context (s) is a vital element so as to grasp the intended meaning (Yule, 2010, 130).
- Meaning is interpreted from what said and what is unsaid, (Yule&Brown, 1988, p.27).

b. A glance at the historicity of pragmatics

The emergence of pragmatics dated back to 1960’s, several factors contributed to its development. These factors can be classified into direct and indirect. Among the indirect factors is the birth of new linguistic approaches, mainly functional linguistics whose concern is language as means of communication and how people actually use language (Cook, 2003, p.9).

Though it does not call, directly, for a pragmatic approach to language, functional linguistics is, actually, questioning two dominating linguistic schools: (i) structural linguistics mainly De Sausserean definition of language as a system excluding anything except language. “My definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system-in a word, of everything known as "external linguistics." But external linguistics deals with many important things-the very ones that we think of when we begin the study of speech”(De Saussure, 1996, p.20), and (ii) generative linguistics, which confines the scope of linguistics to the study of language presentation in the mind, rather than the way in which people actually use language in everyday life (Cook, 2003, p.9). Such criticisms are the scaffold on which pragmatists stand to build a comprehensive approach to language.

Morris’s theory of signs (1938) is the direct factor of the decline of structural linguistics on one hand and the birth of pragmatics on the other hand. The origin of this conviction is that though he borrowed the notion of sign from structural linguistics (De Saussure, 1995,p.67), Morris defined it as part of a system including its user, technically coined ‘the interpreter’ (Morris, 1938, p.3). It is very plain for anyone that interpretation is a vital concept in the pragmatic traditions (Yule, 2010, Yule, 1996, Levinson, 1983). For such a reason that most pragmatics pioneering works refer to Morris’s theory as a founding theory of pragmatics. Levinson (1983) told us that

The modern usage of the term pragmatics is attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris(1983),who was concerned to outline(after Lock and Pierce), the general shape of a science of sign, or semiotics (or semiotic as Morris preferred).Within semiotics, Morris distinguished three distinct branches of inquiry: syntactic(or syntax),being the study of "the formal relation of signs to one another", semantics, the study the study of “the relation of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable (their designate), and pragmatics ,the study of “the relation of sign to interpreters (1983,p.1).
Levinson’s affirmation implies that pragmatics was developed within semiotics, thus throughout three decades one cannot talk about pragmatics outside the periphery of semiotics. As a well defined independent discipline, pragmatics is attributable to Austin and Grice. Their pioneering works, Speech Act theory and maxims of conversation trace the frontier between pragmatics and semiotics. Nerlich (2009) claimed that “The foundations for pragmatics as a linguistic discipline are regarded as having been laid by ordinary language philosophers and speech-act theorists such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, John L. Austin, John R. Searle, and H. Paul Grice” (p.328).

To trace the historicity of pragmatics and its origin as well as its relation with surrounding disciplines, semiotics and linguistics, one finds himself in front of two different findings. On the one hand, relying on the chronological order, linguistics as a scientific study of language, emerged in 1920’s, it predates semiotics that appeared, roughly two decades later, in 1938, while pragmatics emergence dated back to 1960’s. On this basis, semiotics and pragmatics grew out of linguistics. On the other hand, following Morris’s (1938) conviction that semiotics is applicable to all signs, however simple or complex, including language as a particular kind of sign system (p.10), this implies that semiotics covers pragmatics and linguistics.

c. Pragmatics: etymological origin and epistemological background

The term pragmatics can be defined in terms of etymological origin and epistemological background. Etymologically, in the encyclopedia entry about pragmatics, the word pragmatics existed away before the 1970’s in the Greek language. It has as root the seme pragma, it means action. Epistemologically, pragmatics can be defined in relation to pragmatism as a philosophical tradition that appeared in 1870’s in United States. In the encyclopedia entry about pragmatism, there are two major assumptions underlying pragmatism: (i) it rejects the idea that the function of thought is to describe, represent, or mirror reality, and (ii) admits the idea that the function of thought is as an instrument or tool for prediction, action, and problem solving, and most philosophical topics—such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science—are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes rather than in terms of representative accuracy. Both meanings are felt in pragmatics; language is much more than expressing emotions, ideas and giving information, but it is a tool for doing. Searle (1962) claimed “to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing! or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (p.6).

3. Pragmatics a multidisciplinary area

It is axiomatic that pragmatics is a linguistic subfield. Despite of that, it can never be pondered outside the periphery of semiotics as a general theory of knowledge covering logic, mathematics, linguistics and rhetoric, as defined by its founder, Morris. He wrote

Semiotic has a double relation to the science; it is both a science among the science and instruments of science. The significances of semiotics as a science lies in the fact that it is a step in the unification of science, since it supplies the foundations of any special
science of signs, such as linguistics, logic, mathematics, rhetoric and to some extent at least aesthetics (Morris, 1938, p.2).

Morris’s foregoing affirmation has three direct requirements: (i) semiotics is at the crossroad of disciplines; (ii) surrounding disciplines like logic, rhetoric and linguistics have implications on pragmatics, (iii) pragmatics is a hybrid innovation that grew out of logic, rhetoric as well as linguistics, especially functional linguistics.

a. Pragmatics and rhetoric: Synergy Interface

One strong reason why it is quite difficult, though possible, to compare such an archaic discipline as rhetoric with such pragmatics which is in its embryonic stages, is that rhetoric is a prevailing prestigious discipline for ages, while pragmatics is a developing if not marginalized discipline, knowing that it does not receive any attention from scholars who do not have consensus about its utility, it is the wastebasket of the trivial findings of the surrounding researches mainly structural linguistics whose interest is language in its abstract form, Yule (1996) claimed “by placing the investigation of the abstract potentially universal features of language in the center of their work tables, linguists and philosophers of language tended to push any notes they had on every day use to the edges. As the tables got crowded, many of those notes on ordinary language in use begun to be knocked off and ended up in the wastebasket (p.6).”

Despite of that, there are many reasons to ponder to pragmatics and rhetoric as two intersecting disciplines. Comparison between pragmatics and rhetoric is plausible taking for granted a very obvious premise, may be naïve, too, that both disciplines shed the light on language as a human property. Also, the comparison is legitimate knowing that, paradoxically; such an overflowing waste basket becomes a source of inspiration for many scholars (Yule, 1996, p.6), and to reinvestigate old issues, mainly argumentation (Tyteac&Perlman, 1992, Ducrot&Anscombe, 1997), using pragma-rhetorical tools.

b. Speech act theory: a pragma-rhetorical innovation

It is a commonplace that Speech act theory (1962) is a founding theory in the survey of pragmatics. It is obvious, too, that its epistemological root is philosophy since its founders John Austin and John Searle are both philosophers of language (Levinson, 1983, pp.227). This is the first clue proving that, philosophy and pragmatics are indirectly intertwined. For such a reason, the relation between speech act theory, as one of the pragmatic issues, and surrounding disciplines aroused an ongoing controversy since its emergence 1960’s. Nevertheless, in the late 1990, with the development of historical pragmatics as a field of study that lies at the intersection of historical linguistics and pragmatics, (Nerlich, 2009, p.325), two issues are recognized. On the one hand, speech act theory has rhetorical underpinnings; on the other hand, metaphor as an old rhetorical issue is still survived, and pragmatically tackled which implies that the relation between rhetoric and pragmatics is bidirectional. Lotman (2009) affirmed Classical rhetorics was not concerned with the effect of speeches, but it is clear that the principle of perlocutionarity derives from the spirit of rhetorics, which regards speech as
a responsible activity.) For example, John Searle’s discussion of metaphor from the perspective of speech act theory represented the return of the aims of classical rhetorics (….). Searle proposed the following hierarchy: direct speech acts, indirect speech acts, metaphor, and irony. Metaphor emerges when the sentence meaning diverges from the utterance meaning. Searle distinguished between simple and complex metaphors: in the first case, the relationship between a sentence and an utterance is one-to-one; in the second case, several utterances correspond to one sentence. However, in both cases the utterance meaning can be inferred from the sentence meaning. (p.872).

As its label suggests, speech act theory is based on the assumption that language “is not used to say something, to describe states of affairs but rather actively to do thing” (Levinson, 1983, p.228). Such assumption is, actually, inspired from a pragmatic orthodoxy that “the advantages of studying language via pragmatics is that one can talk about people’s intended meaning, their assumptions, their purposes or goals and the kinds (for example requests) that they are performing when they speak”(Yule,1996,p.4).

Actually, both assumptions draw on the idea, already expressed in the pioneering work of Aristotle who defined rhetoric as the use of the available means to persuade (Aristotle, 2004, p.50). It implies that behind these different frameworks -rhetoric, speech act theory - lay a common assumption that language is in the end used purposely to change the world, such assumption is central in pragmatics literatures, too. In this direction, Bitzer (1999) claimed that

A work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some tasks. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change (p.229)

Furthermore, Aristotelian definition of rhetoric in terms of speaker’s intention -to inform and please his audience (Aristotle, 2004, p. 215) or to persuade his objectors (ibid. 50) - is another clue of rhetorical and pragmatic intersection; it proposes an intimate relationship between rhetoric speech act theory and pragmatics. The origin of this conviction is that intention is a vital concept in pragmatic literatures and a defining feature of speech act theory, as well.

In the pragmatic paradigm, intention and intentionality are axial concepts; broadly speaking they are deployed to refer to speaker meaning (Grice, 1975; Searle, 1962; Yule, 2010), according to Haugh (2008) a considerable amount of theorizing in cognitive philosophical pragmatics, or so called –Anglo-American pragmatics has been permission the view that communication involves speaker’s expressing their intentions and the hearer attributing intentions to those speakers (p.99). Similarly, speech act theory outlines a comprehensive view wrapping all sides of language, it categories utterances based on the speaker’s intentions (Potts, 2011, p.15).
All in all, what is in common between rhetoric pragmatics and speech theory is the way they conceive language as a tool that shape our thoughts as well as our world.

c. Argumentation: a pragma-rhetorical question

There is a common place repeating that argumentation is as old as rhetoric, according to Aristotle (2004) “an augmentative discourse as a rhetorical species highly embellished with very sophisticated style with the purpose to persuade (p.50). Thus for ages such concepts, argumentation and rhetoric, are interchangeably used, according to Hietanen (2007) “In many rhetorical analyses (…) , the terms ‘rhetoric’ and ‘argumentation’ are used more or less synonymously.(p.100). Accordingly, all of the issues in the interface between rhetoric and developing disciplines, mainly discourse analysis and pragmatics, argumentation engendered continuing controversy for six decades, since 1950’s (Tytceca&Perlman, 1958; Amoosy, 2009; Anscobmre, 1987; Ducrot & Anscombe, 1997). Furthermore, theoretical survey authenticates a tie between argumentation and old rhetoric. Perlman and Tyteca (1958) seminal work "Traité de l’argumentation" is introduced in terms of object that is the study of argumentation and its attachment to an old tradition, of rhetoric and Greek dialectic (p.1). This is felt, too, in two dominating approaches to argumentation- Toulmin’s logical approach (1958) and Ducrot and Anscombe (1997) linguistic approach- which put argumentation at the crossroad of disciplines mainly logic and rhetoric. In a collective publication entitled “Argumentation Across the lines of Disciplines”, Eemeren et al (1986), forwarded argumentation as an umbrella term covering four areas of knowledge: logic, dialectic, rhetoric and pragmatics.

So far, theoretical literatures about the intertwine between pragmatics and rhetoric is so giant to review a through descriptive survey of in the limited space of this paper, thus for the sake of brevity, it will be convenient to mention one major thing that argumentative analysis rely heavily on pragmatic and rhetorical tools, as well. Syllogism, topoi and inference as a distinctive triad, in old rhetoric, still survive in most argumentative approaches (Toulmin, 2003, Ducrot & Anscombe).

4. The intersection between functional linguistics and pragmatics

Nineteen seventies was a confounding area in the linguistic survey. On one hand, formal linguistic axioms related to language as a system -grammatical and semantic rules- were downright. On the other hand, new issues related to language use language and language taxonomy were aroused. Also, notes about language use, which are pushed to the edges, are placed on the center. They are useful to indicate some problems of language which are beyond semantic, lexical and syntactic understanding, then to anticipate the need for pragmatics to solve problems related to language use in other way. Bar-Hillel (1971) asserted “forcing bits and pieces you find in the pragmatic wastebasket into your favourite syntactic-semantic theory” (p.405).Also, the taxonomy of language into units was among the aroused issues, Halliday and Hassen (1976) proposed that “a text is a unit of language in use, is not a grammatical use …text is best regarded as a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning” (pp. 1-2).
In this context, formal linguistics orthodoxies went bankrupt for a central reason that, as a perspective approach, particularly, concerned with language as abstract system regardless its real use (De Saussure, 1995), does not cover different aspects of language. It is the scope of functional linguistics and pragmatics, as well to provide a holistic view to language. Halliday (2004) defined the scope of functional linguistics as follow “We have referred to language (i) as text and as system, (ii) as sound, as writing and as wording, (iii) as structure — configurations of parts and (iv) as resource — choices among alternatives.”(p.19). In the same direction, pragmatists endeavor to fill such gaps between such levels (sound, words structure), and dig up the meaning across other reference more than the truth conditions. Gazder (1979) asserted “pragmatics has its topic those aspects of the meaning of utterances which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to the truth conditions of the sentences uttered” (Gazder, 1979, p. 2 as cited in Levinson, 1976, p.12). Accordingly, functional linguistics emerged as an alternative that brought into consideration a number of issues which are neglected in formal linguistics.

As its name denotes functional is concerned with the way people use language, Halliday and Hassen (1989) define the notion of function as such “what do we understand by the notion functions of language? In the simplest sense of the word ‘function’ can be thought of as a synonym for the word use, so that when talk about functions of language we may mean no more than the way people use their language”(p.14). In the same way, Dik (1997), defined functional linguistics in terms of study scope, in the following terms, including many notions like communication and influence each others have pragmatic denotations. He claimed

When we take a functional approach to the study of natural languages, the ultimate questions one is interested in can be formulated as: how does the natural language use (NLU) work? How do speaker and addressee succeed in communicating with each other through the use of linguistic expressions? How is possible for them to make themselves understood, to influence each other’s stock of information (including knowledge, beliefs, prejudices and feelings) and ultimately each other’s practical behavior by linguistic means.”(p.3)

Following Dik’s affirmation, functional linguistics intersects with pragmatics at two major points: (i) communication is conceived as the ultimate purpose of language user. Yule (2010, p.27), and (ii) cooperation between language users so as to make themselves understood, to influence each other’s by linguistic means.

On this basis that Yule and Brown (1988) define functional linguistics in association with pragmatics. They wrote: “The discourse analyst necessarily takes a pragmatic approach to the study of language in use. Such an approach brings into consideration a number of issues which do not generally receive much attention in the formal linguist's description of sentential syntax and semantics (p.27).

So far, the comparison between functional linguistics and pragmatics makes plenty of evidence that functional linguistics and pragmatics intersect at two levels: (i) as descriptive approaches to language, functional linguistics and pragmatics are questioning structural linguistics as a perspective approach, (ii) they brought into consideration a number of issues
neglected in formal linguistics, among such issue the way and the purpose for which language is used.

5. Conclusion

The article has presented a very brief survey, both conceptual and historical, of the developments of pragmatics. The study ends with four noteworthy issues.

- It is high time to rethink about pragmatics not as wastebasket (Yule, 1996), but as a prestigious discipline as rhetoric for a strong reason that since its emergence, pragmatics has provided explanations and examinations to linguistic phenomenon which are beyond semantic and syntactic understandings.
- Pragmatics can be seen as a continuation to rhetoric.
- Pragmatics bridges the gap between semantic and syntax.
- Pragmatics can be seen as a mixed marriage between rhetoric as an old discipline and semiotics as a new discipline.
References


-Perelman, Ch & Tyteca, L. (1992).*Traité de l'argumentation, la nouvelle rhétorique*, (2d) Bruxelles : L’université de Bruxelles.


