

The pragmatic framework

2.1 Introduction

The present chapter provides an outline of pragmatic approaches that constitute a fundamental framework for discourse studies. A seminal starting point for the discipline of pragmatics is the so-called “Organon model” from the 1930s, which considers language a strategic tool to pursue specific communicative goals (Section 2.2). One of the most influential pragmatic approaches is speech act theory, established in the 1950s and 1960s. Departing from the assumption that speakers “do things with words”, this philosophical theory identifies different types of verbal actions and discusses conditions for their successful performance (Section 2.3).

The cooperative principle, developed in the late 1960s and 1970s, is dedicated to an indispensable prerequisite for interpersonal communication: interlocutors expect each other to act in a rational and constructive manner (Section 2.4). As a reaction to the cooperative principle, relevance theory in the 1980s argues that communication is chiefly based on the expectation and use of verbal contributions that can be regarded as contextually relevant (Section 2.5). In order to achieve discursive goals and to prevent obstacles to smooth communication, speakers usually pay attention to each other’s “face”. Along these lines, politeness theory elaborates on verbal strategies that mitigate potentially face-threatening speech acts in discourse (Section 2.6).

2.2 The Organon model

The discipline of pragmatics is generally based on the assumption that communication is a type of action. However, this view of communication is already more than two thousand years old. One of the earliest works on language, Plato’s *Cratylus* (a dialogue on the origin of language written in about 390 B.C.), describes speech as a form of action and words as instruments with which actions can be performed.

The German philosopher and psychologist Karl Bühler was referring to this work when he described language as a tool, “Organon”, which people use in order to communicate with one another. Bühler’s **Organon model** (1934/2011) has had a major impact on the way language is dealt with in discourse studies. Bühler stated that a sound can only qualify as a linguistic sign if a three-fold relationship exists connecting the sound to a sender, a receiver and an object that is being referred to (Figure 1). Parallel to this three-pronged relationship, each linguistic sign (S) has three functions simultaneously:

1. A sign functions as a symptom as it says something about a sender, for example, whether the sender is female or male or what the intention of the utterance is.
2. A sign is a symbol because it refers to objects and states of affairs.
3. A sign serves as a signal because a receiver must interpret it or react to what has been said.

This three-part division can be illustrated with any utterance. Below is an example.

- (1) Have you heard that strange story about the drunk who decided to play barber and cut off his friend’s ear?

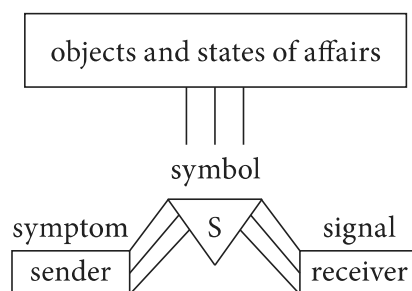


Figure 1. Bühler’s Organon model

By asking this question, the speaker indicates that he or she wants information from the person who is being addressed. By using the word “strange”, the speaker is also expressing an opinion. This is the **symptom** aspect. In the utterance a reference is made to a story, a real event. That is the **symbol** aspect. The question is an appeal to a hearer. A hearer is not expected to just answer “yes” or “no” and change the topic. Something along the lines of “No, tell me about it” or “Yes” followed by the hearer’s own reaction is expected. This is the **signal** aspect.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1981) also refers to Bühler. According to Habermas, speakers claim that their utterances are valid. In the case of *predicting*, for example, the speaker claims that the statement will come true in the future (Example 2). In the case of *congratulating*, the claim to validity is based on an expression of emotion on the

part of the speaker, namely, that the congratulations are sincere (Example 3). In the case of *ordering*, the speaker bases the claim to validity on assumed authority to issue the order (Example 4).

- (2) Tomorrow you are going to take a math exam.
- (3) Well done! Congratulations on your great achievement!
- (4) You need to work harder to pass the exam!

Habermas based these validity claims on the Organon model and the three aspects of symbol, symptom and signal. Through the symbol aspect of an utterance, a claim is made as to the truth of the statement as in the prediction example. Through the symptom aspect, a claim is made regarding sincerity, as in the congratulation example. Through the signal aspect, a claim is made regarding legitimacy as in the order example.

In this chapter the focus is on the basic assumptions of the Organon model, namely, that language is an instrument with which objectives can be achieved and that this instrument cannot be considered to be separate from speakers and hearers, or writers and readers, in performing communicative acts.

Language, and therefore discourse, is a two-way instrument, an instrument for a speaker and a hearer or a writer and a reader. Or as the Danish linguistic philosopher Otto Jespersen wrote in the introduction to his *Philosophy of Grammar* (1924/2007):

- (5) The essence of language is human activity – activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, and activity on the part of that other to understand what was in the mind of the first.

If two parties use an instrument for an “activity”, then such an activity can only be successful if both parties adhere to general rules or principles and thereby utilize certain strategies. This can be illustrated with a non-linguistic example. If two people want to hang a painting (activity), they use a hammer, nails and a ladder (instruments), and they have to coordinate their actions. There will have to be some form of cooperation; while one is standing on the ladder, the other can hand the tools to the first, etc. Rules concerning politeness will also have to be followed; while one person is on the ladder, the other should not try to push the first off. One general principle of collective activity is *cooperation* and an often-used strategy to achieve this is *politeness*. This is also true in the case of verbal communication. On the basis of this cooperation principle and guided by so-called politeness strategies the communicators have to perform their communicative acts. But what precisely are those communicative acts? The theory, called *speech act theory*, provides an answer to this question.

2.3 Speech act theory

In speech act theory, language is seen as a form of acting. This theory stems from the school of philosophy that is called **ordinary language philosophy**. The proponents of this school, which flourished in England in the middle of the last century, wanted to analyze philosophical problems by looking at ordinary language and trying to ascertain what insights it could offer into reality. For example, the ethical question of why human activity is judged to be good or bad demands that the way individuals apologize for bad behavior also be studied. By examining how people perform speech acts such as apologizing, promising, ordering, etc., these “philosophers of ordinary language” wished to contribute to the solution of philosophical problems. Moreover, these scholars reacted to the contemporary trend of formal philosophy and its tendency to explain language exclusively through formal logic and the analysis of propositions (see Section 5.2). According to ordinary language philosophy, formal philosophy prevented a proper explanation of indirect speech acts (see Section 2.3.2) and conversational implicatures (see Section 2.4), which refer to meanings beyond what is literally expressed.

2.3.1 Types of speech acts and felicity conditions

Speech act theory has had a strong influence on the field of discourse studies as this theory focuses on the question of what people are doing when they use language. Consider the next example. There is a striking difference between the following two sentences.

(6) It’s raining.

(7) I promise that I will give you one hundred dollars tomorrow.

In (6) a statement is made that may or may not be true. As for (7), however, it is not possible to say that it is true or that it is not true. With verbs such as *to promise* (in the first person), not only is something being said; more importantly, something is being done. In (7) an act is being performed through an utterance. By saying “I promise ...”, a promise is made. But saying “It’s raining” does not make it rain.

The English philosopher John L. Austin (1976) used the terms **constative** and **performative** to describe this difference. In constatives, such as sentence (6), something is stated about reality; in performatives, such as (7), an act is performed by the utterance itself. Austin was not successful, however, in establishing criteria for describing the difference between these two concepts. It can, after all, be argued that an act is being performed in the case of constative utterances as well; a warning can be given or a statement might be made as in the case of (6).

This led Austin to the conclusion that all expressions of language must be viewed as acts. He distinguished three kinds of action within each utterance. First, there is the **locution**, the physical act of producing an utterance. Second, there is the **illocution**, the act that is committed by producing an utterance: by uttering a promise, a promise is made; by uttering a threat, a threat is made. Third, there is the **perlocution**, the production of an effect through locution and illocution, for example, the execution of an order by the addressee.

Consider another example. In the statement “There is a draft in here”, the locution is the production of the utterance. Depending on the situation, the illocution could be a request, an order, a complaint, etc. The perlocution could be that a door or window is closed or that the addressee replies that he or she is not a servant. It is important to emphasize that the reaction to an illocution, the so-called **uptake** that leads to a perlocution, can differ depending on the situation. Below is an example of four different uptakes of the same utterance.

Table 1. Various uptakes of the same utterance

Locution of the speaker	Illocution	Uptake by the hearer
There’s a good movie tonight	Invitation	O.K. let’s go
There’s a good movie tonight	Advice	O.K. I will go there
There’s a good movie tonight	Excuse	Never mind
There’s a good movie tonight	Offer	Thank you!

In speech act theory the illocution is the focus of attention. Language philosophers have tried to give an overview of all possible illocutions, from assertives to requests, from promises to exclamations. This, however, proved to be a very difficult task, because it is by no means clear what exactly the characteristic differences between the proposed illocutions are. For example, a promise could be a threat in the locution “I promise, I’ll get you!” First, the phenomenon *illocution* itself has to be studied.

Among the intriguing problems with illocutions, there is one that has drawn special attention, namely, the issue of successful illocutions. It is easy to see that certain minimum requirements must be met for an illocution to be successful. If anyone other than a church leader excommunicates someone, then the act of excommunication has not been executed. If in a casino someone at the roulette table suddenly calls “*Rien ne va plus!*” (“No more bets!” or “Game over!”), this cannot be construed as being the illocution *refusing* if this person is not the dealer.

The American philosopher John R. Searle (1969) formulated four **felicity conditions** that illocutions must meet. These four conditions are illustrated below using the illocution *to promise*.

- (8) Felicity conditions for *to promise* (speech act)
- a. **the propositional content**
In the case of “promising”, the act that speakers commit themselves to (i.e. the proposition) must be a future act to be carried out by the speakers themselves. One cannot make a promise for someone else or promise to do something that has already been done.
 - b. **the preparatory condition**
This condition concerns those circumstances that are essential for the uptake of an illocution as the intended illocution. In the case of promising, these circumstances would require that the content of the promise is not a matter of course. Another preparatory condition is that the promise must be advantageous to the addressee; one cannot promise something that is solely disadvantageous.
 - c. **the sincerity condition**
Speakers must honestly be willing to fulfill the promise. Even if speakers are not willing, they can be held to their promise.
 - d. **the essential condition**
This is the condition that separates the illocution in question from other illocutions. In the case of “promising”, this means, among other things, that the speakers take upon themselves the responsibility of carrying out the act stated in the content of the promise.

Searle used these felicity conditions to show that the successful exchange of illocutions is also bound by certain rules. In terms of form and function, this means that a form can only acquire a valid function given certain conditions.

2.3.2 Illocutions in discourse

How does the more philosophical speech act theory in the previous section contribute to the study of discourse? First, it can provide insights into the requirements that a form (the locution) must meet to ensure that the illocution and the intended uptake take place. This illocution serves as a prerequisite for the achievement of the perlocution the speaker or writer has in mind. Second, this theory can serve as a framework for indicating what is required in order to determine the relationship between form and function, between locution, on the one hand, and illocution and perlocution, on the other hand.

Among the many attempts at classifying illocutions, John Searle’s (1976) approach is still the best-known and most influential one. He distinguishes between five main types of illocutionary acts, depending on their communicative functions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts

Type	Illocutionary force	Examples
1. <i>Representatives</i>	commit the speaker to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed content	assert, claim, report, state, inform, conclude
2. <i>Directives</i>	are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something	ask, order, command, request, beg, plead, pray, invite, advise
3. <i>Commissives</i>	commit the speaker to some future course of action	promise, offer, threaten, pledge, guarantee, refuse
4. <i>Expressives</i>	convey the speaker's psychological attitude toward a state of affairs	thank, congratulate, apologize, condole, deplore, welcome
5. <i>Declarations</i>	bring about an immediate correspondence between the expressed content and reality	excommunicate, nominate, dismiss, christen, sentence

There are a number of cases in which the utterance itself, the locution, provides an indication of the intended illocutions. John Searle (1969) calls these indications **IFIDS, illocutionary force indicating devices**. IFIDS include performative verbs, word order, intonation, accent, certain adverbs and the mode of the verb. If an IFID is present, the utterance is said to have an explicit illocution; in all other cases the utterance is said to have an implicit or indirect illocution. Below are a few examples of explicit illocutions.

(9) I request that you put out your cigarette.

(10) He is putting out his cigarette.

(11) Is he putting out his cigarette?

(12) Are you going to put that cigarette out or not?

(13) Would you please put out your cigarette?

In (9) the performative verb "to request" makes the illocutionary intent explicit. The difference in word order between (10) and (11) is indicative of the illocutionary intent, in this case "statement" and "question", respectively. Rising intonation and an accent on the word "cigarette" can also convey an expression of surprise. In (12) the tag "or not" is indicative of the imperative character of the illocution. In (13) the modal verb "would" indicates that this is a request; the adverb "please", depending on the intonation, can make this request either cautious or insistent. It is also possible to convert (13) into an order by placing a special accent on "please" and "cigarette".

It should be noted that IFIDs do not always provide a definitive answer regarding illocutionary intent. The IFID *if ... then* in the following two examples would suggest a conditional promise, but in fact only (14) contains a conditional promise.

(14) If you take the garbage out, I will give you a beer.

(15) If you keep this up, you will have a nervous breakdown.

In (15) the IFID is not the only relevant factor; more background information is needed, specifically that a nervous breakdown is dangerous. Otherwise, it is impossible to deduce why (15) is generally seen as a warning. If so much additional information is needed to determine the function of explicit language utterances, then it should be clear that this is even more difficult in the case of implicit or indirect utterances. See the example in Table 1 of Section 2.3 again, “There is a good movie tonight”, which could function as an indirect invitation or excuse.

Much knowledge is needed to link the right illocution to a locution. Consider the next example in the form of an interrogative.

(16) Can you stop by in a minute?

Why is this interrogative generally interpreted as a request? A request can be identified by the following felicity conditions:

(17) Felicity conditions for requests

a. *the propositional content*

The content must refer to a future act, X, which is to be carried out by the addressee.

b. *the preparatory condition*

1. The addressee is capable of executing X and the speaker believes that the addressee is capable of doing it.
2. It is obvious to both conversational participants that the addressee will not perform the act without being asked.

c. *the sincerity condition*

The speaker actually wants the addressee to do what has been requested.

d. *the essential condition*

The utterance serves as an attempt to persuade the addressee to execute X.

On the basis of rules in this definition, it can be said that the interrogative given in (16) possesses the illocutionary intent of a request. This does not, however, explain why this interrogative must be interpreted as an order when it is uttered by a supervisor to a subordinate. In this case the illocution is far from self-explanatory. For correct interpretation, knowledge of the discourse situation and knowledge of the relation between the participants are required. However, that is not all. Something like knowledge of the world is necessary as well. Compare the following examples.

(18) This panther has brownish-yellow spots.

(19) Your left eye has brownish-yellow spots.

Both cases can be viewed as simple statements, but (19) can also be intended as a warning if a situation is being described which could be viewed as dangerous. It could, on the other hand, also be seen as a sign of affection. So, an illocution (a simple form) can in many cases only be interpreted (have a function) when different kinds of knowledge are used.

If the literally expressed illocution (the so-called “secondary” illocutionary act) does not match the contextually intended illocution (the “primary” illocutionary act), Searle (1975) calls this an **indirect speech act**. For instance, the declarative sentence in (20) literally indicates a representative illocution, an informative statement. However, in a specific context the actual illocution may be a directive, if the hearer is implicitly requested to leave.

(20) There’s the door.

When a form can have so many different functions, how can people communicate at all? If the interpretation of a locution depends on so many different factors – linguistic cues, knowledge of the discourse situation, knowledge of the world – could it be that in the exchange of illocutions more is involved to guide our interpretation procedures and to prevent us from miscommunication? Yes, was the answer of another famous philosopher.

2.4 The cooperative principle

An utterance often conveys more than the literal meaning of the words uttered. The following example is from the classic article *Logic and Conversation* (1975) by the English logician and philosopher Herbert P. Grice.

(21) Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, “Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues and he hasn’t been to prison yet.”

The form of this utterance does not say everything about the meaning and, therefore, the function. A can derive from B’s remark that B does not hold a high opinion of C. In fact, B has basically said that C is a potential criminal. Yet, this cannot be derived from the literal meaning of B’s words. Why then can A draw these conclusions? Because A can assume that there is some relevance to B’s, at first glance, superfluous addition concerning prison. The only reason B would add that remark is if B meant to imply that C is a potential criminal.

Grice called this derivation a **conversational implicature**. In fact, it is the meaning that an addressee has to deduce from the locution, considering the context of the utterance. By using the term *implicature*, Grice wanted to emphasize that it is not a logical implication such as the if-then relationship expressed by the formula “A→B”. The addition of the word *conversational* denotes that the derivations being dealt with are an essential part of the information-transfer process in conversations.

A speaker can only get such a meaning – in Example (21) that C is a potential criminal – across if the listener cooperates. To capture this notion, Grice formulated a general principle of language use, the **cooperative principle**:

(22) THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the speech exchange in which you are engaged.

Grice distinguished four categories within this general principle. He formulated these in basic rules or maxims. In two categories he also introduced supermaxims.

(23) Grice’s maxims

I. **Maxim of quantity**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

II. **Maxim of quality**

Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- Maxims:
1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

III. **Maxim of relevance (originally labeled “relation”)**

Be relevant.

IV. **Maxim of manner**

Supermaxim: Be perspicuous

- Maxims:
1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly.

The maxims of the cooperative principle can be used to describe how participants in a conversation derive implicatures. Grice gives the following example. Bob is standing by an obviously immobilized car and is approached by Sue. The following exchange takes place:

- (24) Bob: I am out of petrol.
 Sue: There is a garage round the corner.

Bob can deduce from Sue's reaction that she means that there is a garage around the corner that is open and sells gasoline. Sue, however, has not mentioned these facts. Bob can only make these assumptions if he assumes that Sue is acting in accordance with the cooperative principle and is adhering to the maxim of relevance. It has been shown that such implicatures can be arranged on a continuum between the poles of *strong* and *weak* (Clark, 2013). In Example (25), Bev's response is not a direct answer to Ken's *yes-no* question. However, her utterance can be understood as a relevant reply if adequate implicatures are assumed.

- (25) Ken: Are you worried the price of petrol might go up in the budget?
 Bev: I don't have a car.

The implicatures in (25a–b) below are considered rather strong, because it would be difficult to regard Bev's reply as relevant if they did not apply. By contrast, the implicatures in (25c–e) are relatively weak. They might possibly follow from her utterance but there is less evidence for them in Bev's words. Potentially, these weaker implicatures are merely constructed by Ken beyond Bev's intentions.

- (25) a. Bev does not buy petrol.
 b. Bev is not worried about the price of petrol going up in the budget.
 c. Bev does not think she needs to worry about car owners.
 d. Bev disapproves of people who own cars.
 e. Bev cares about the environment.

In discourse studies the cooperative principle and its maxims are often referred to as they provide a lucid description of how listeners (and readers) can distill information from an utterance even though that information has not been mentioned outright. This is of importance to research on the relationship between form and function.

Grice did, however, have a number of additional comments concerning the cooperative principle. First, the maxims are only valid for language use that is meant to be informative. This excludes, for example, communicative activities such as small talk. Second, there are, from the esthetic or social point of view, other possible maxims. Grice suggests the maxim "Be polite", but eventually does not include it in his model, in contrast to Geoffrey Leech's approach to politeness, which takes into account not only conversational but also social parameters (see Section 2.6). Third, another principle is at work here. Consider the quantity maxim. An overabundance of information does not necessarily mean that it is this

maxim that is being violated, since it can also be seen as a waste of time and energy and thus as a violation of some efficiency principle.

In addition, the Gricean maxims have been criticized for several reasons. Some maxims are rather vague. For example, how can it be determined which information is required (first maxim of quantity)? The four maxims have been presented as being of equal importance, but there are situations in which the maxim of quality is more important than the maxim of manner, and vice versa. Moreover, the cross-cultural validity of the maxims is highly debatable (see Chapter 15). Nevertheless, Grice's cooperative principle has had a great impact on discussions in the field of discourse studies. This is probably because Grice showed with everyday examples that communication, which seems to enroll without rules, is organized by basic rules.

2.5 Relevance theory

In the literature on Grice's maxims special attention is given to the maxim of relevance. One reason for this is that it is unclear how it can be determined whether a contribution to a conversation is relevant or not. A number of suggestions have been made in the direction of a clear description of relevance. It has, however, proved to be exceedingly difficult to determine exactly when the maxim of relevance has been disregarded. Consider the following example of a question and a number of possible answers:

- (26) Bob: Where's my box of chocolates?
Sue: a. Where are the snows of yesteryear?
 b. I was feeling hungry.
 c. I've got a train to catch.
 d. Where's your diet sheet?
 e. The children were in your room this morning.

Bob could react with surprise and ask why Sue is suddenly quoting a line of poetry, in the case of answer (a), or with "I was talking about chocolates and now you're talking about the children", in the case of answer (e). At first sight, it seems that Sue is not acting within the constraints of the maxim of relevance. However, if Bob assumes that Sue is adhering to the maxim of relevance, then any reaction Sue gives could be construed as being relevant.

- (27) a. Sue is not just quoting poetry; she is not really asking a question. Sue, by reacting the way she does, is simply making clear that the chocolates, like the snows of the past, have gradually disappeared and that there is no good answer to Bob's question.

- b. Sue is making clear that she has eaten Bob's chocolates.
- c. Sue does not want to answer the question because she is in a hurry. Or, Sue is evading the question with an excuse; she knows more than she is revealing.
- d. Sue is postponing giving an answer; first she wants to know whether or not Bob should be eating chocolate.
- e. Sue is suggesting that the children ate the chocolates. Or, Sue is suggesting that the children know where the chocolates are.

Obviously, numerous other possible reactions for Sue are conceivable. The main point is that every reaction can be construed as being relevant. It is, of course, possible to imagine contributions to conversations that would, at first sight, appear to be irrelevant, but these usually end up sounding like excerpts from a comedy routine:

- (28) A: Would you care to dance?
 B: I'd love to. Do you know anyone else who would like to?
- (29) A: (teacher) You should have been here at nine o'clock.
 B: (student) Why? Did something happen?

However, even in these examples, B's reaction could be interpreted as being relevant if in (28) A is a waiter or if in (29) school does not start until 9:30. The problem now is that it can be fairly objectively established when or whether the maxims of quality, quantity and manner are disregarded, but it seems quite impossible to determine when an utterance no longer counts as relevant. This makes it unclear what the value of the maxim of relevance is.

The omnipresence of relevance in communication has led to the **relevance theory** of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986/1995). They took a different starting point, and made the relevance concept the cornerstone of their view of communication. That is to say, they turned the disadvantage of the vagueness of relevance to the benefit of a clearer theory of what we mean by "understanding each other". Although they use the same term as Grice, they propose a very different concept of **relevance**, so that their theory is sometimes called a "post-Gricean" approach. According to relevance theory, utterances create expectations of relevance and people judge the relevance of utterances without needing to resort to any kind of maxim.

A good start to getting their point is to realize that language in use is characterized by what is called **underdeterminacy** or **underspecification**. We have already seen that the example in Section 2.3, "There is a good movie tonight", can be vague or ambiguous if one does not take into account the discourse situation. This can be seen as a form of underspecification. But even when the discourse situation

is known and the locution is clear, the locution is often underspecified. A good example is this notice often found on the door of a lecture hall:

(30) Doors must be locked and windows closed when leaving this room.

This locution can bear the meaning that students must lock up whenever they leave class for, say a toilet break, but obviously no student will interpret the utterance in that way. Almost anyone will understand that the notice only applies or is relevant when at the end of the day the last lecture has ended and people leave the room without returning. None of this extra information is included in the thus underspecified notice, and still this missing information is filled in and as a result the utterance is understood correctly.

Sperber and Wilson argue that such ambiguities are dissolved in the right context on the basis of the relevance concept. While addressees interpret the meaning of an utterance such as in (30), they assume that it makes sense, that it is relevant and that it forms a coherent whole. The addressees only select the relevant features of the context and recognize whatever the addresser communicates as relevant. But how does that work, attaching relevance to contributions such as the movie example or Example (30)?

It is important to recognize an utterance as an act of “**ostensive communication**”, i.e., an act of making something mutually manifest to both interlocutors. Along these lines, communication must not be seen as just getting the thoughts of the speaker into the mind of the addressee but as a means of enlarging mutual “**cognitive environments**”. The cognitive environment is a set of facts perceptible in reality or inferable from knowledge about reality. Hearers and readers make sense of (a piece of) discourse, they interpret the connections between utterances as meaningful, drawing conclusions based on their background knowledge of the world: they use their cognitive environment and, as a result of interpreting the utterance, their cognitive environment is enlarged.

If an addresser can assess the cognitive environment of an addressee by an act of ostensive communication, then he or she can predict what kind of assumptions the addressee will actually make in reaction to an utterance. In the case of (30) the addresser can foresee that the cognitive environment of an addressee in a lecture hall will be something like: ‘when I leave class for a toilet break, other people will stay there, I will return in a few minutes and continue listening to the lecturer’. The addresser will assess the addressee’s reaction to the utterance as something like: ‘there is no need to lock up and close the windows because of what I know about the situation’. And thus the addresser knows that a notice as in (30) will suffice in the given situation and will only be judged as relevant in the right context: at the end of the day when the lecture hall is definitively left.

The theory of Sperber and Wilson added two important notions to studying the way people understand each other: **explicature** and **degree of relevance**. These notions can be clarified in discussing the following passage from a “ticket buying interaction”, which is taken from Cutting (2008).

- (31) A: Well there’s a shuttle service sixty euros one-way. When do you want to go?
 B: At the weekend.
 A: What weekend?
 B: Next weekend. How does that work? You just turn up for the shuttle service?
 A: That might be cheaper. Then that’s fifty.

The participants have to interpret the verbal acts of the other as attempts to change their mutual cognitive environment. This ostensive communication is the input for the explicature, which is the enrichment of the underdetermined locution or the formulation of the intended explicit content. This includes the process of filling in missing information or adjusting information to meet the expectations of relevance. Accessing the explicature of an utterance may support the activity of unfolding a conversational implicature.

This explicature, this specification of underspecified utterances, is ruled by the principle of relevance. Only that information is filled in that is relevant to the communication situation. In this conversation, B assumes that A will understand “At the weekend” to mean “Next weekend”. B assumes that this underspecification is relevant enough. However, since A is going to sell a ticket, he or she needs to verify if this is true. A’s last answer, “That might be cheaper. Then that’s fifty”, is not a complete answer. If A had wanted to be more explicit, he or she could have said: “If you purchase a ticket now, you have booked a seat, which costs 60 euros. If you buy the ticket when you turn up, it costs 50 euros.” A, however, presumes B to be able to infer all of this and fill in the missing words.

Through this explicature it can be made reasonable that not all utterances are equally relevant and that not all utterances are equally successful. Utterances cannot strictly be divided into relevant or irrelevant utterances. There is a degree of relevance based on a cost-benefit scale. This degree of relevance of an utterance is determined by two factors: **cognitive effects** and **processing effort**. Cognitive effects concern the way new information can interact with what is already known, i.e., everything that contributes to the addressee’s representation of the world. Processing effort pertains to the effort of decoding linguistic information and the effort of accessing information in the context to link the new information to.

The degree of relevance can then be described as follows: the greater the cognitive effect and the less effort it takes to create that effect, the greater the relevance

is. So, in this example the utterance by B “At the weekend” has low relevance, because the information cannot be clearly linked to what is already known, as can be seen by A’s reaction. The processing effort can only be successful when the exact weekend is known. And in this context the last utterance by A has a high degree of relevance. The new information “cheaper” and “fifty” can easily be linked to information that is already given in A’s first utterance.

So much for a more philosophical-inspired theory about the foundations of communication. This theory has influenced the analysis of discourse mainly through the concept of underspecification and the focus on the relation between discourse and the situation.

2.6 Politeness theory

Notions such as cooperation and relevance are mainly valid for informative language use. Language users are not, however, always interested in the effective transfer of information or relevance of an utterance. In the following examples the speaker wants the addressee to close the door.

- (32) a. Close the door.
b. There’s a draft.
c. Would you close the door?
d. Would you be so kind as to close the door?

According to the maxims of the cooperative principle, (32a) is sufficient. Language is, however, often used more indirectly, as in (32b). Sometimes certain politeness forms such as in (32c) and (32d) are applied as well.

An important source of inspiration in the study of politeness phenomena is the work done by the Canadian-American social psychologist Erving Goffman (1956), who introduced the concept of **face**. By this he meant the self-image that people project in their social contacts with others. Face has the meaning as in the saying “to lose face”. In Goffman’s opinion, every participant in the social process has the need to be appreciated by others and the need to be free and not interfered with. Goffman calls the need to be appreciated “**positive face**” and the need not to be disturbed “**negative face**”.

Goffman wanted social interaction, which includes verbal communication, to be studied from the perspective that participants are striving for stability in their relationships with others. For the sake of successful interaction, participants in conversations usually avoid damaging one another’s face. Refusing a request or reproaching someone is an action that can form a threat to the other’s positive or negative face. In the case of these “**face threatening acts**” (FTAs), something is

needed which will reduce the violation of face to a minimum and, therefore, preserve stability as much as possible. This can be achieved by using “**face work techniques**”. Examples are broad circumspect formulations of refusals, which make it clear that the request made is impossible to grant.

How does politeness fit into this approach? Politeness prevents or repairs the damage caused by FTAs. The greater the threat to stability, the more politeness, face work technique, is necessary. Just as there are two types of face, there are two types of politeness. Face work that is aimed at positive face is called “**solidarity politeness**”; this kind of politeness is, for example, achieved by giving compliments. Face work that deals with negative face is known as “**respect politeness**”, and can be achieved by not infringing another’s “domain” in the communication. Below are a few examples. When a personnel manager has to turn down a job applicant who should not have applied in the first place owing to lack of education, this is an FTA that threatens the positive face of the applicant, and that of the manager. For this reason the personnel manager will be more apt to write (33b) than (33a).

- (33) a. We do not understand why you bothered to apply.
b. We have some doubts concerning your prior education.

In the following interaction between an instructor and a student at the end of a tutoring session, the second variant is more polite as it is less damaging to the instructor’s face and that of the student.

- (34) A: I’ve tried to explain this as clearly as possible. Now I have to leave as I have another appointment. I hope that the homework will be easier next time.
B: a. I still don’t understand the material.
b. If problems should arise, is it all right if I stop by tomorrow?

Inspired by Goffman’s work, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978/1987) developed a theory on the relationship between the intensity of the threat to face and linguistically realized politeness. In their approach, positive face is defined as “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants”. Negative face, on the other hand, is “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition”.

The intensity of the threat to face is expressed by a weight (W) that is linked to an FTA. This weight is the sum of three social parameters: (a) the **rate of imposition**, which is the “absolute weight” of a particular act in a specific culture; (b) the **social distance** between the speaker and the person addressed; (c) the **power** that the person being spoken to has over the speaker. The term *absolute weight* refers

to the fact that, for example, the request “May I borrow your car?” is in a category other than “May I borrow your pen?” The request to borrow a car is of course not quite such a great demand if the person requesting the car is the car owner’s brother. This illustrates that the factors *distance* and *power* influence the ultimate weight.

The ultimate weight of an FTA can be expressed by a value according to the formula:

$$(35) \text{ Intensity of threat to face} \\ W(\text{FTA}) = R + D + P \\ \text{Weight of Face Threatening Act} = \text{Rate of imposition} + \text{social} \\ \text{Distance} + \text{Power}$$

Brown and Levinson did not indicate how values are to be assigned to R (rate of imposition), D (social distance) and P (power). But it should be clear that the value for P is different in the following examples.

- (36) a. Excuse me, sir, would it be all right if I close the window?
b. Mind me closing the window?

Utterance (36a) is more likely to be said by an employee to his or her boss, while in the same situation, (36b) might be said by the boss to the employee. In these examples parameters R and D have the same values.

In their research on linguistically realized politeness, Brown and Levinson investigated a number of languages. Their analyses indicate that there are many ways of committing an FTA with a given weight. All of these variants can, according to Brown and Levinson, be reduced to five strategies:

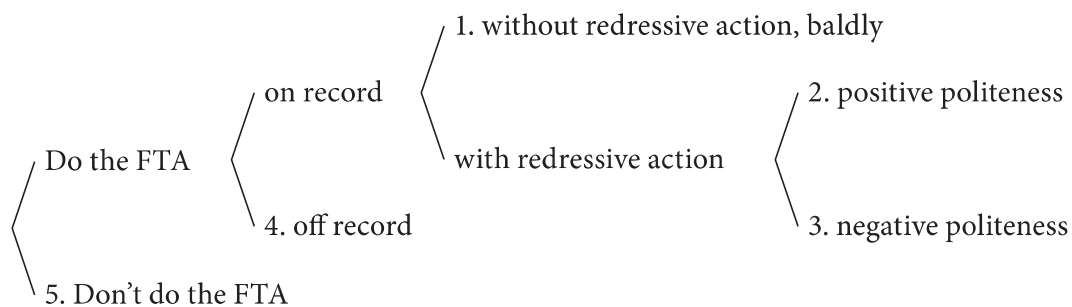


Figure 2. Possible strategies for doing FTAs

The fifth strategy is implemented when the risk of speaking is too great, when, for instance, an individual does not risk answering an impertinent and face-threatening question and simply remains silent. “Off record” means that the FTA is not recognizable as such. An example of this is the (36c) variant of the request that is made in (36a/b).

- (36) c. I’m just so cold.

When the addressee replies “Then close the window”, the speaker can still maintain that a request has not been made. “**Redressive action**” refers to an action that is meant to improve the stability between conversational partners and is, therefore, an action that minimizes or prevents a loss of face.

Below are examples of different strategies for asking a person for a hundred dollars.

- (37)
- a. Lend me a hundred dollars. (baldly)
 - b. Hey Bob, how about lending your old friend a hundred bucks? (positive politeness)
 - c. I’m sorry I have to ask, sir, but could you possibly lend me a hundred dollars? (negative politeness)
 - d. Oh no, I’m out of cash! I forgot to go to the bank today. (off record)

The strategies are numbered according to their degree of politeness. (Strategy 5 is, from this point on, left out of consideration.) If the W of an FTA is high, the speaker will choose a strategy with a higher number. This explains why grave accusations or inconvenient requests are often formulated indirectly (strategy 4).

The Goffman approach and Brown and Levinson’s theory provide an adequate research framework for determining gradations of politeness and for analyzing indirect language. The following question is an example of an indirect request:

- (38) Are you doing anything special tonight?

The form of this utterance makes it clear that this is an inquiry about an individual’s planned activities. This question can, however, also be an invitation on the part of the speaker to the addressee to go out together.

How can a question in this form have an entirely different function? According to Levinson (1983), the answer is that in some cases speakers first make a **pre-request** in order to find out whether they will get a positive response to their request. Levinson describes this in an underlying structure consisting of four positions. Below are an example and the underlying structure.

- (39)
- A: 1. Are you doing anything special tonight?
 B: 2. No, not really. Why?
 A: 3. Well, I wanted to ask if you would like to go out to dinner with me.
 B: 4. I’d love to.

- (40) The underlying structure of (39):
1. Pre-request
 2. “Go ahead” reaction
 3. Request
 4. Consent

Goffman's work on face offers an explanation for the pre-request phenomenon. If B had given an evasive answer to the pre-request, then that would have eliminated the necessity of making the main request, preventing the loss of face of both participants. A does not have to deal with a refusal and B does not have to refuse the request in a direct manner; after the pre-request, B can claim to be extremely busy, which will soften the blow of the refusal.

Indirect requests have certain similarities with pre-requests in that both are attempts to ascertain whether or not there are grounds for refusing a direct request. Consider the following example. A customer walks into a shoe store and asks:

(41) Do you sell jogging shoes?

This question is actually a preliminary check to see if the sales clerk will be able to give an affirmative response to a request to see an assortment of jogging shoes. In Levinson's (1983) opinion, indirect requests can be viewed as pre-requests in an underlying structure consisting of four positions.

- (42) A: 1. Do you sell jogging shoes?
B: 2. Yes.
A: 3. Would you show me some, please?
B: 4. I'll go get them for you.

In many cases the reaction to a pre-request is the same as to the direct request.

- (43) A: 1. Do you sell jogging shoes?
B: 4. Yes, I'll show you some.
A: Thank you.

This reduction can be explained with the politeness strategy. It ensures that the customer does not lose face; the customer is no longer obliged to formulate a direct request.

Although Brown and Levinson's face-based model has remained the most influential pragmatic approach to politeness, it has met with criticism (Eelen, 2001). In particular, it has been shown that the claim of universality is not tenable, since politeness is ultimately a highly culture-dependent construct (see Chapter 15). Moreover, it is not reasonable to assume that specific expressions are inherently face-threatening irrespective of their context of use. For instance, direct orders in cases of emergency do not require any mitigation (e.g. *Fire! Get out!*). Finally, positive and negative politeness are by no means mutually exclusive. They may both work together in one utterance, if, for example, familiar address forms (e.g. *daddy, sweetheart*) are combined with the indirectness of modal verbs (e.g. *would you mind ..., could you ...*).

An alternative model of linguistic politeness was proposed by Geoffrey Leech (1983). Since Grice's cooperative principle largely neglects the social aspects of interaction, Leech proposes a complementary "**politeness principle**", which can be used to explain some cases in which speakers do not observe the conversational maxims. For example, in order to be polite, interlocutors may disregard the maxims "be brief" or "do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence". Leech's politeness principle is further divided into the six maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. The pivotal tact maxim, for instance, says "minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other" and can be illustrated by the following example.

- (44) a. Have another cookie.
b. Give me a cookie.

Accordingly, although both sentences are imperative clauses, (44a) can be judged as polite, as it expresses benefit to the hearer, while (44b) is impolite, as it imposes cost on the hearer. Since, however, in Leech's approach the number of maxims is expanded and flouts of the maxims do not lead to implicatures as with the cooperative principle, the theory has not gained a large following.

More recently, research has increasingly focused on **impoliteness**, which can briefly be defined as face-aggravating discourse (Bousfield, 2008). On the one hand, impoliteness occurs whenever contextually expectable politeness strategies are missing. This is the case if a face-threatening speech act is carried out baldly, without any redressive action. On the other hand, impoliteness can be caused by adding explicit routines of rudeness that boost or maximize face damage. These are, among others, insults (e.g. *you bastard*), dismissals (e.g. *get lost*), silencers (e.g. *shut up*) or curses (e.g. *go to hell*).

Three main communicative functions of impoliteness can be distinguished (Culpeper, 2011): (a) **affective impoliteness**: the speaker is under the emotional state of anger or distress. Since this feeling is supposedly caused by the addressee, negative evaluative labels are typically attributed to the hearer (Example 45); (b) **coercive impoliteness**: the speaker intends to gain and exercise power through utterances that denigrate and threaten the addressee. While the enforced activity is not in the hearer's interest, the speaker benefits from its performance. At the same time, however, the speaker's own positive face is damaged because he or she appears downright rude (Example 46); (c) **entertaining impoliteness**: the speaker intends to achieve amusement at the expense of a third party that functions as the target of hostile humor. For instance, this type may manifest itself in deprecating jokes about social or professional groups (Example 47).

- (45) You are such a nuisance.

- (46) Move it, or I'll kick your ass.
- (47) What's the difference between a lawyer and a leech? When you die, a leech will stop sucking your blood and drop off.

The subject of impoliteness has become topical in recent years also because of verbal aggression in online communication (see Section 4.6). Rudeness on the Internet is generally facilitated by the anonymity of participants and the lack of social context cues (Arendholz, 2013). Impolite utterances can occur in various forms on the web, such as “flaming”, which often comprises swearing and personal insults. While “trolling” includes deceptive and irritating posts in online communities, “hate speech” is often politically motivated and typically includes discriminatory labels.

2.7 Summary

The groundbreaking Organon model attributes three basic functions to the linguistic sign, which can be used for a broad classification of discourse types (see Section 4.2). In the tripartition of locution, illocution and perlocution, as established by speech act theory, the illocution has triggered most research. While the locution refers to the physical production and basic meaning of an utterance, the perlocution is difficult to grasp because it is not under the speaker's control. The illocution, however, pertains to communicative goals and can thus be investigated from various perspectives. First, specific felicity conditions must be met for the successful performance of illocutionary acts. Second, illocutions can be classified into the five categories of representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations, which could also be used for a taxonomy of discourse types. Third, if the literally expressed illocution is not identical with its contextual function, this results in an indirect speech act. Since most illocutions, such as requests in the directive category, can be verbally performed in a great number of ways, there is generally a gradience of (in-)directness.

The four conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner, which add up to the cooperative principle, do not only indicate default expectations of interactants in communication; they also help to clarify why unexpressed meaning in the form of implicatures is understood by hearers. Relevance theory marks a new start in pragmalinguistic philosophy. Defining the degree of relevance through the relation between cognitive effects and processing effort, it explains why one utterance may appear more relevant to a recipient than others. With its sociological foundation, the face-based approach to politeness offers insights into linguistic techniques used by speakers to mitigate face threatening

acts. By assessing the three parameters of rate of imposition, social distance and power relations, addressers are able to choose suitable politeness strategies. All in all, pragmatic approaches shed light on the ways in which interlocutors produce contextually adequate utterances and at the same time “read between the lines” during the comprehension process.