

### **Beyond the Pragmatic Wastebasket: One perspective**

Be more careful with forcing bits and pieces you find in the pragmatic wastebasket into your favorite syntactico-semantic theory. It would perhaps be preferable to first bring some order into the contents of this wastebasket as is, to clarify somewhat better the explicandum—to use Carnap's undeservedly neglected slogan—before embarking on the explication.

Yehoshua Bar-Hillel (1971) “Out of the Pragmatic Wastebasket”  
*Linguistic Inquiry* 2.3:404.

Far from being a receptacle for discardables, the pragmatic waste-basket is more like a can of worms: the problems that the basket contains tend to spill over into all the domains of linguistic thinking. Instead of making linguistics neat and clean, in the best logical or mathematical style, the waste-basket imposes its unruly order on our explanations. . . .

Jacob L. Mey (2001) *Pragmatics: An Introduction* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Blackwell, p.21

Linguists generally agree that the grammar of a language has several components: at least including phonology, morphology, and syntax, and—most would concede—compositional semantics. But the more sophisticated our semantic analyses, the more obvious it becomes that a wide range of pragmatic phenomena intrude into the calculation of meaning. We cannot grasp the intended meaning of an utterance on the basis of syntactic form + lexical content alone. At some point, the theorist must appeal to pragmatics to help explain attested meanings.

Bar-Hillel criticized those who would use pragmatics in an ad hoc way to explain phenomena which don't easily fit into their neat theories of generative syntax/semantics. In textbooks and monographs on the subject, instead of characterizations of pragmatics *per se*, one typically finds a list of phenomena that are generally agreed to be at least partly pragmatic in nature: indexicality, presupposition, focus, implicature, semantic underdetermination, vagueness, illocutionary force, etc., each addressed independently. Rarely do we find the sort of theoretical overview of the subject which would give some perspective on how these phenomena are related, and how pragmatics in general plays a role in interpretation in tandem with grammatical phenomena. But what is pragmatics? How can we study it in a non-ad hoc, systematic way before putting it to use in particular analyses? What does pragmatics have to do with the grammar of a language, and with human grammar and grammatical competence more generally?

I will give a brief critical overview of some of the main pragmatic theories in the contemporary literature, and then present my own perspective on that field, on what pragmatics is and its role in human grammar. I will argue that while syntax and semantics are best characterized as formal systems of categorical rules which generate constituents and their conventional contents, the study of pragmatics is the study of the use of the resulting grammatical objects in particular contexts of utterance. But the grammar itself is *designed* for such use, and the relevant notion of context is one particular to linguistic utterance, so that compositional interpretation, based on conventional content, draws on particular elements of the context of utterance in very particular ways *in the course of interpretation*. The result steers a course between Wild West theories of pragmatics, where unconstrained pragmatic enrichment of conventional content cannot predict how one interpretation, and not another, arises in a particular context, and theories which attempt to force as many pragmatic bits and pieces as possible into an increasingly baroque syntactic Logical Form, putting off as long as possible the investigation of the can of worms itself.