

Pragmemes

Keith Allan

The term *pragmeme* was first used and described by Jacob Mey:

The theory of pragmatic acts [...] focuses] on the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as on what is actually being said. [...] The emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual (or an individual's) speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation; such a generalized pragmatic act I will call a *pragmeme*. The instantiated individual pragmatic acts, [...] *practs*, refer to a particular pragmeme in its realizations. (Mey 2001: 221)

The idea is that the context in which a speech act occurs affords a set of possibilities to both speaker S and hearer H for what kinds of things can appropriately be said in respect of that context. In later work, Mey offers additional information:

The pragmeme captures a *function* from user to user, from user to the world, and vice versa; as such it is a pragmatic function, establishing and warranting a particular *pragmatic act*. The pragmeme is thus the embodied realization of all the pragmatic acts (or 'allopracts') that can be subsumed under it, such as the various manifestations of expressing gratitude, in much the same way as the various phonetic manifestations of /r/ may be caught under the umbrella of the same phoneme. (Mey 2016: 139)

The pragmeme is a function that 'maps situations onto individual human activities' (ibid.). Thus, for example, the pragmeme of insulting maps the attack on the target (with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action and/or treating the target with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect) to the utterance that seeks to achieve the perlocutionary effect of demeaning someone and/or of affronting or outraging them by manifest arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence.

A second example: suppose a (male) colleague turns up late for a meeting and on entry immediately says *I'm sorry, my car broke down*. It will normally be understood that he is apologizing for being late, not for the fact that his car broke down, and that mention of the car break-down is intended to explain his being late because car-break-downs disrupt journey schedules. Even if none of his colleagues knew he was coming by car, he does not have to spell this premise out, it is implicit in (and non-monotonically entailed by) what he has said.

The situation demands a pragmeme of apology; this particular way of apologizing is a pract which has many characteristics shared by other allopracts of the same pragmeme.

A final example. There are many different views and definitions of *reference* (see Sullivan 2006 for a survey). Most philosophers and linguists would agree that reference is a relation that obtains between language expressions and what speakers use those expressions to talk about. For the pragmaticist the focus is on a speaker's use of a language expression in the course of talking about (referring to) its denotatum, in other words, on a speaker's act of referring. For instance, if Joe says *Saddam Hussein is dead*, Joe refers to someone called Saddam Hussein whom he supposes we can identify from common ground (see Allan 2013, Stalnaker 2002, 2014); Joe also refers to the (purported) fact of Saddam's death at some unspecified time in the past. What is less obvious is that a hearer's recognition of the speaker's reference is also a pragmatic act of interpretation that uses context and common ground to make sense of the utterance: the fact that literary criticism, academic and legal argument, etc. flourish because the 'same' text can be interpreted differently by different hearers and readers surely proves that interpretation is active not passive.

So, referring is a class of pragmatic act that map something in the context to words through which S identifies that something to H. Suppose S utters (1) when standing before El Temple de la Sagrada Família in Barcelona.

(1) Spain's greatest architect designed this church.

Anyone who has visited la Sagrada Família will be aware that it is visually dominant such that an utterance of (1) made when standing in front of it will unambiguously refer to la Sagrada Família unless the speaker is very obviously NOT referring to it because, for instance, s/he is pointing to a picture or description of another church (such as the Basilica di San Marco) in a guide book. Ordinarily, the complex demonstrative *this church* refers to the most salient church in the foreground of attention – which identifies a necessary condition of the pragmeme for a particular kind of pragmatic act of reference that is clearly generalizable to a wide variety of occasions. There are several reasons for thinking that, in the situation of utterance described above, the reference to 'this church' would be unambiguous. One is that S will know at least roughly where she is and, under most circumstances, so will H. Even if S and H had not planned to be in front of la Sagrada Família and merely happened upon it, they would see that (based on encyclopaedic knowledge) that the building in front of them looks like a church. They might also know that there is a church called (El Temple de) la Sagrada Família (or a translation of that name into another language). Ordinarily, but not necessarily,

this will be strengthened by additional information such as knowledge of its approximate location and appearance, and/or some idea of its history and who designed it. There is no architect present, only a building of a kind that we know by experience (encyclopaedic knowledge) will have been designed by an architect. This is the route by which reference to the architect of the building is established. The name of the architect, Antoni Gaudí, must be sourced via pragmatic inference from encyclopaedic knowledge (see Allan 2006).

To successfully perform a pragmatic act of reference requires astute assessment of the context and common ground and choice of the language expression (the pract) that will best point the hearer to the intended reference in those circumstances. See also Mey 2010.

Kecskes 2010 has criticised Mey for focusing on the situation of utterance to the exclusion of the socio-cognitive attributes of pragmemes:

This [socio-cognitive] view unites the societal and individual features of communication and considers communication a dynamic process in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them at the same time. Speaker and hearer are equal participants of the communicative process. They both produce and comprehend relying on their most accessible and salient knowledge expressed in their private contexts in production and comprehension. (Kecskes 2010: 2890)

I doubt that Mey would dispute the importance or relevance of Kecskes' account of pragmemes. I certainly incorporate within my own notion of 'context' and 'common ground' both Mey's situational and Kecskes' socio-cognitive aspects of a speech event (or other communicative act), and most definitely regard context as an essential ingredient for the proper interpretation of language expressions, including pragmemes, see Allan 2018.

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