Pragmatics - The Foundation of Communication
A Review

Sweta Sinha, Ph.D

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Abstract

Pragmatics is a very important aspect of language that helps in establishing the purpose of any communication. It accounts for the usage, the properties and the processes of language. Communication is not an isolated process. It occurs in continuum. It is a two-way channel between the speaker and the hearer with reversible roles and the complete comprehension of the utterance can be obtained only when the entire context is taken into consideration. The paper reviews the development of pragmatics as a separate branch of study focusing on its various aspects and elements. Speech acts which are the essence of any communication are an integral part of pragmatics.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Utterance, Speech Acts, Deixis, Context, Reference.

1. Introduction

Basically, pragmatics can be defined as the study of language use, or, in a more complicated phrasing, the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage, properties and processes. Linguistics is traditionally divided into several constituent disciplines like Phonetics which identifies a continuous series of speech sounds; Phonology that studies the way in which speech sounds are systematized; Morphology which investigates 'morphemes' or word units; Syntax which studies sentence formation processes and Semantics that explores the meaning of linguistics.

All of these actually deal with language resources, i.e. the ingredients that make up a language. Now the question is, from where does pragmatics come into picture? It cannot be identified with a specific analysis and so it is not associated with the traditional concept of a linguistic theory. It does not actually constitute an additional of a theory of a language but it

offers a different perspective. Many words cannot be understood unless we understand all the aspects of word knowledge. Morris (1938) distinguished between syntax, semantics and pragmatics in terms of three correlates: signs, the objects to which signs are applicable and sign users or interpreters. His approach already implies the recognition of an entirely different dimension touched upon by pragmatics. He writes:

> "Syntactic rules determine the sign relations between sign vehicles; Semantic rules correlate sign vehicles with other objects; pragmatical Rules state the conditions in the interpreters under which the sign vehicle is a sign. Any rule when actually in use operates as a type of behavior, and in this sense there is pragmatical component in all rules."

[1938: 35]

It is a very novel field of research that has been puzzling the linguists all over the world. Linguists have come up with several definitions for this linguistic field. Morris (1938) proposed the trichotomy of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. He defines pragmatics as "the study of the relation of signs to interpreters" but he soon changed it to "the relation of signs to their users" (1938). A year later Rudolf Carnap (1939) proposed "to call pragmatics the field of all those investigations which take into consideration … the action, state and environment of a man who speaks or hears (a linguistic sign)". (1938)

Pragmatics actually covers the study of language use in relation to language structure and context of utterance. It must try to find out the relation between the structure and the context of utterance. Apart from this, when we, as hearers come across an utterance we do not limit ourselves to the meaning of the word only. We try to find out the intended meaning. Thus, the study of *intended speaker meaning* is called pragmatics.

2. Literature Review in Brief

Most of the research in this filed has been done in the twentieth century. Originally, the work was done by the philosophers of language such as Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975). With the advent of the 70s, linguists such as Ross (1970) and Lakoff (1970) attempted to incorporate much of the work on performatives, felicity conditions

and presuppositions into the framework of Generative Semantics. But with the breakdown of Generative Semantics, it was left without a unifying theory and much of the research is being carried out in various disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, psychology, communication, sociology and anthropology.

Social interaction is the primary use of communication. Therefore, we, as users must distinguish between using language *to do* something and in using language *in doing* something. When we think of the use of language to do something we are actually thinking of what a person actually does with the words in particular. The situation/ context become very important. We focus on the intonations, purposes, beliefs and desires that a speaker has in speaking.

Talking for us seems to be a very common and effortless task but there is a lot of complexity involved in the procedure with respect to mental and physical activities. We must now think over the point that what actually linguistic communication is. In order to find a solution to this problem we come across the MESSAGE MODEL. The schematic presentation of this model is as underneath:

SPEAKER   MEDIUM   HEARER

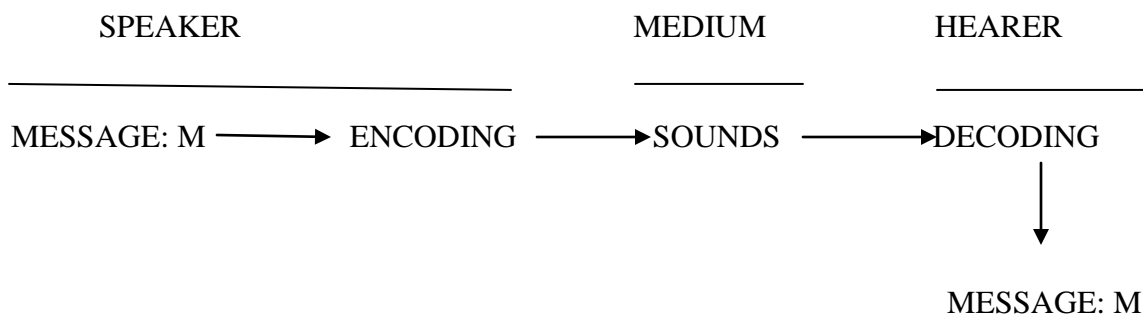MESSAGE: M ⟶ ENCODING ⟶ SOUNDS ⟶ DECODING

MESSAGE: M

Fig. 1 THE MESSAGE MODEL

But the major drawback or the most crucial aspect of this model is that it actually equates the message that a speaker says and the one which is comprehended by the hearer. It fails to account for six major defects:

- The use of ambiguous expressions
- Real world reference
- Communicative intentions

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- Non literal communications

- Indirect communication

- Non- communicative uses of language.

To account for this defect, an Inferential Model (a model that connects the message with the meaning of the uttered expression by a sequence of references) has been proposed. It includes referential, non literal and indirect strategies thereby avoiding the second, the fourth and the fifth objections and it provides an account of communicative intentions and non- communicative uses of language there avoiding the problems third and fourth.

George Yule (2010) is of the view that, in many ways, pragmatics is the study of *invisible* meaning. We should never forget that always we understand many more things than what is actually said (or written). For this to happen, speakers (and writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provide us with some insights into how more of it gets communicated than is said. The comprehensive knowledge of pragmatics cannot be acquired unless we get acquainted with some of the most discussed and common topics of this linguistic field.

3. Some Basic Concepts

a) *Deixis*

Whatever we speak (utterance) actually relate to a real world or the world that we perceive to be existing around us. This relation is of two types: descriptive (in which the reference is usually left in the province of semantics) and the positioning of an utterance in a surrounding reality (where the reference is about something). It is with the help of deixis that language is anchored to the real world. And this is achieved by 'pointing' at variables along some of its dimensions. This phenomenon is called deixis and the 'pointers' are *indexical expressions* or *indexicals.* There are essentially four dimensions involved : time, space, society and discourse (the ongoing linguistic activity).

The markers of ***temporal deixis*** like today, now, at present, yesterday and so on, fail to give out the complete meaning. Even if we determine the *deictic centre,* that is, the point of

reference we fail to derive at the meaning and therefore, we must look at the *deictic context.* Therefore, the meaning of 'today' which might seem quite unambiguous cannot be precisely understood without the knowledge about the time of speaking. And not only the date but the precise time of speaking is also important. Deictic expressions can never be taken at face value. There is no automatic or mechanistic link between choices of tense and temporal anchoring points. Thus, a certain degree of interpretive flexibility is very much desired because if not so, communication would cease at an elementary level.

Spatial deixis is marked by words like anywhere, there, here etc. The discourse itself does not indicate the deictic centre but a lot of assumption plays an important role in this. The choice of the verb 'go' indicates movement away from the spatial point of reference, typically either located with the speaker(s), or with the people the discourse is about. The choice of pointers may be primarily motivated by a geographical orientation. There is also a continuous shift in *deictic perspective*. Whilst the deictic centre remains the same, the pointers are mainly motivated by more or less 'objective' spatial properties.

Social deixis anchors language into its immediate interactional context of use. This process includes, at its most basic level, what is usually called **person deixis**. Face- to face communication involves the assumption of a number of social factors. These social factors or social actors have roles underlying the basic 'three- fold distinction' between first person, the deictic centre along the social dimension, second person or addressee, and third person or 'others'. This can be explained with the help of the following examples (Verschueren 1991):

1. Debby: Go anywhere today?
2. Dan   : Yes, we went down to Como. Up by bus, and back by hydrofoil.
3. Debby: I might do that ext Saturday.
4. Jane: What do you mean when you say perhaps not the most interesting of Italian towns?
5. Jack: He means certainly not the most interesting………………..
6. Dan: Just trying to be polite……………….

All these three are activated in (1) an omitted 'you'; (2) an omitted 'we' and an omitted 'he' (6). Also included in the domain of social deixis and often involving pronoun choices, is a phenomenon that may be called **attitudinal deixis**: the use of indexical expressions which signal aspects of social status and/ or forms of respect, whether or not grounded in 'objective' status.

Lastly, discourse too provides a dimension for utterance anchoring. **Discourse deixis** is involved whenever a form of expression points at earlier, simultaneous, or following discourse. Sometimes, we come across a special time of discourse- deictic expression when it refers to 'conference' and thus being named 'anaphoric'. Discourse deixis may also be of a 'self-referential' or 'reflexive' kind as in the expression 'in this book' or 'that boy who danced' and so on. A 'projective' kind of discourse deixis is to be found and when projection and self- reference is combined we get an expression like: 'This book will explain…………….'

b) *Context*

The influence of context is undoubtedly unmatched in our understanding of the meaning of the world. There are actually various types of contexts determining word meaning but our area of concern is best described in terms of 'linguistic context', also known as 'co- text'. The 'co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. This surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word means. Words like bank, ruler, jam are homonyms, ie., They have more than one meaning. If the word 'bank' is used with the expressions 'of the river' or 'steep and overgrown' we come to know which 'bank' we are talking about. The same way, if this word occurs with expressions like 'finance', 'cheques' and 'cash' we come to know of the other meaning ob bank that is being talked about.

We also know one more thing. Words are affected by their 'physical context' also. If we see the word BANK on the wall of a building in a city, the 'physical' location will influence our interpretation. Our understanding of much of what we read and hear is tied to the physical context, particularly the time and place, in which we encounter linguistic expressions.

c) *Reference*

While discussing deixis, we considered reference very lightly like words are used to refer to people and places. But actually, the matter is not very simple. We have to define 'reference' as

an act by which a speaker uses language to enable a listener to identify something. We often assume that the words we use to identify things are in direct relationship with those things. Several times we come across situations when we do not actually know a person, still we refer to him. The key process of 'inference' helps us to get that extra information that helps the listener to connect what is said about and what must be meant.

Thus, we see that linguists have been trying to work on the broad conception of speaker reference in which a speaker has something in mind and with his utterance he wants to convey the same thing to the heaer. It can be broadly classified as follows:

(i) **Literal singular reference**: In this the speaker uses a singular term literally to refer to something that the term denotes. For example:

7. He is tired.

    - A particular male is being referred to.
    - 'He' denotes 'males'.

(ii) **Non-literal singular reference**

In non-literal singular reference, the speaker intends to refer to some particular thing that the singular term does 'not' denote. This can make communication more difficult because the hearer cannot use the denotation to cut down the class of potential referents. In 'indirect singular reference' the speaker refers to one thing by first referring the hearer to another. For instance, pointing to a dot on a map of Australia, he might say:

Here is the town we should stay in when we visit the Uluru.

d) *Anaphora*

When we establish a referent

8. Can I borrow your book?

    And subsequently refer to the same object

9. Yeah, it's on the table.

We have a particular kind of referential relationship between 'book' and 'it'. The second (and any subsequent) referring expression as an example of *anaphora* and the first mention is called the *antecedent.* Thus, book is the antecedent and 'it' is the anaphora.

Anaphora can be defined as *subsequent reference to an already introduced entity.* (Yule 1996).

We use anaphora, mainly, in texts to maintain reference. As with other types of reference, the connection between referent and anaphora may not always be direct. The term 'inference' has been used here to describe what the listener (or reader) does. When we talk about an assumption made by the speaker (or writer), we usually talk about 'presupposition'.

e) *Presupposition*

When a speaker uses certain references, in normal circumstances, he or she keeps one thing in mind that the hearer knows which referent is intended. In a more general way, speakers continually design their linguistic messages on the basis of assumptions about what their hearers already know. Sometimes, these assumptions may be mistaken but most of the time, as we see in daily life they turn out to be correct. What a speaker assumes is true or is known by the hearer can be described as a *presupposition.*

Now let us consider the following examples:
10. I met your father yesterday.
11. Why did you arrive late?
12. When did you stop talking to her?

In (10) here, we see that there is an obvious presupposition that you have a father. In (11), we see that the presupposition that you did arrive but you have arrived late. In (12), there are two presuppositions. The first is that earlier you used to talk to her and secondly, you no longer talk to her.

One of the tests used to check for presuppositions remains true. Let us consider the following examples:

13. I met your father yesterday.

14. Why did u arrive late?

15. When did you stop talking to her?

In (13), we see that there is an obvious presupposition that you have a father. In (14), the presupposition is that you did arrive but you have arrived late. In (15), there are two presuppositions. The first is that earlier you used to talk to her and secondly, you no longer talk to her.

One of the tests used to check for the presuppositions underlying sentences involves negating a sentence with a particular presupposition and considering whether the presupposition remains true. Let us consider the following example:

16. I sat for the examination.

17. I did not sit for the examination.

The second sentence is the negation of the first sentence. Although these two sentences are opposite in meaning, there is a presupposition (18) that

18. There was an examination.

And this remains true in both the cases. This is called the *constancy under negation* test for pre- supposition. Thus, there are actually three types of phenomena that go by the label of pragmatic presupposition:

(i) A speaker's assumptions about the speech context are presupposition. Lakoff (1970, 175) writes:

Natural language is used for communication in a context, and every time a speaker uses a sentence of his language……..he is making certain assumptions about that context.

(ii) A set of conditions have to be satisfied in order to make the intended speech appropriate in the circumstances. (Fillmore 1982) writes:

By the presuppostional aspects of a speech communication situation, I mean those conditions which must be satisfied in order for a particular illocutionary act to be effectively performed in saying particular sentences.

(iii) This view is related to the shared background information as characterized by Jackendoff (1972). He writes:

We will use……… "presupposition of a sentence" to denote the information in the sentence that is assumed by the speaker to be shared by him and the hearer.

4. Aspects of Pragmatics

Pragmatics has some special aspects and philosophers and linguists have tried to decipher more and more about three pragmatical aspects of language. They are:

PERFORMATIVES

PRAGMATICS → SPEECH ACTS
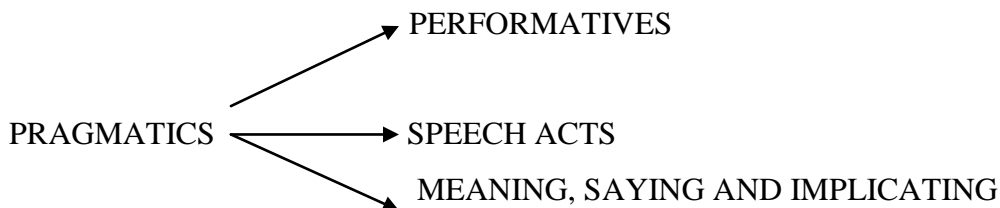
MEANING, SAYING AND IMPLICATING

Fig. 1.2 Aspects of Pragmatics

Let us now discuss with the first one, that is, performatives or performative utterance.

a) *Performative Utterance*

Austin (1961) introduced 'performative' as a *new and ugly word* into philosophy and linguistics. He said:

I want to discuss a kind of utterance which looks like a statement…….and yet is not true or false…in the first person singular present indicative active…….if a person makes an utterance of this sort we would say that he is <u>doing</u> something rather than merely <u>saying</u> something.

It is not very long when philosophers took it as a matter of course that the only work of utterance is to be true or false. But soon another problem cropped up. People began to ponder that if an utterance cannot be classified as either true or false then what do they become. They concluded that they, thus, become nonsensical. And it was this approach that opened the gates to an entirely new world of 'nonsense'. Soon it was found that statements which were considered to be nonsensical, actually had a lot of meaning. They may not report a fact but they may perform other functions like influencing people, as a result, a new slogan has been coined: "different uses of language". The old approach is now considered as a descriptive fallacy.

Certainly, language has infinite uses. But the pity is that people are apt enough to invoke a new use of language whenever they are entangled in some problem. We must discuss the multiple uses of language on the basis of some definite structure. There are certain statements-perfectly straight forward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person singular present indicative active, and yet we shall see that they couldn't possibly be true or false.

Also when a person makes an utterance, there are times when he is 'doing' something rather than merely 'saying' something. Let us consider the following examples: Suppose in a course of a marriage ceremony someone says

19. I do (take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife)

or again, when anyone treads on someone's toe and says

20. I apologize.

It is not merely reporting but people are actually indulging in it. These kinds of utterances are referred to as 'performative' utterances. Such utterances are not true or false. But they do have certain loopholes. An utterance becomes unhappy when certain rules are broken. There are two rules which must e adhered to. The first one is that the convention invoked must exist and be accepted. The second rule, also a very obvious one, is that the circumstances in which we appropriate for its invocation. If these rules are not observed then the act that we intend to perform would not come off. But this in several cases, gives rise to misunderstanding. The next problem, now, is to find out whether an utterance is per formative or not. There is a bit of test to

find this out. The sentences in which the verb is in the passive voice and in the second or third person, the utterance becomes performative. E.g.

21. Passengers are warned to cross the line by the bridge only.

But still, this is not a full proof method. After the break down of this grammatical criterion, we should like to suppose that any utterance which is per formative could be reduced or expanded or analyzed. There are a great many devices that can be used for making clear what act it is we are performing when we say something- the tone of voice, cadence, and gesture- and above all we can rely upon the nature of the circumstances, the context in which the utterance is issued. This is one of the ways in which the language develops in tune with the society.

b) *Speech Acts*

The concept was introduced by the philosopher John Austin. In his own search for ways of coping with language as a form of action, he first made a distinction between 'constantive' and 'performative' utterances.

In this dichotomy, constantives such as,

22. I went to London

can be evaluated along a dimension of truth. Performatives, on the other hand, as discussed earlier cannot be judged on the parameters of truth and falsity. They are judged on the parameter of 'felicity'. His conclusion was simple: all utterances contain both constantive and performative elements; they are all sayings and doings at the same time. As a result he replaced the constantive- performative terminology by a three- fold distinction: 'locutions' are acts of saying something; 'illocutions' are what is done in saying something; and 'perlocutions' are what is done by saying something. Utterance actually is not of much interest for theorists and linguists because it is actually the speaking of a syllable, a word, sounds which can be produced by a parrot or a tape recorder. It is not exclusive to human beings. The main interest lies in 'illocutionary acts' and 'perlocutionary' acts because they produce the effect on the hearer. Leaving terminological details aside, we see that it is at this point that Jon Searle (1969) took over his speech act formula F(p), where 'F' stands for (illocutionary) force, the action side of

every speech act, and 'p' for proposition, the content side of the speech at. Before proceeding further let us look at the following figure that makes the classification easy to understand.
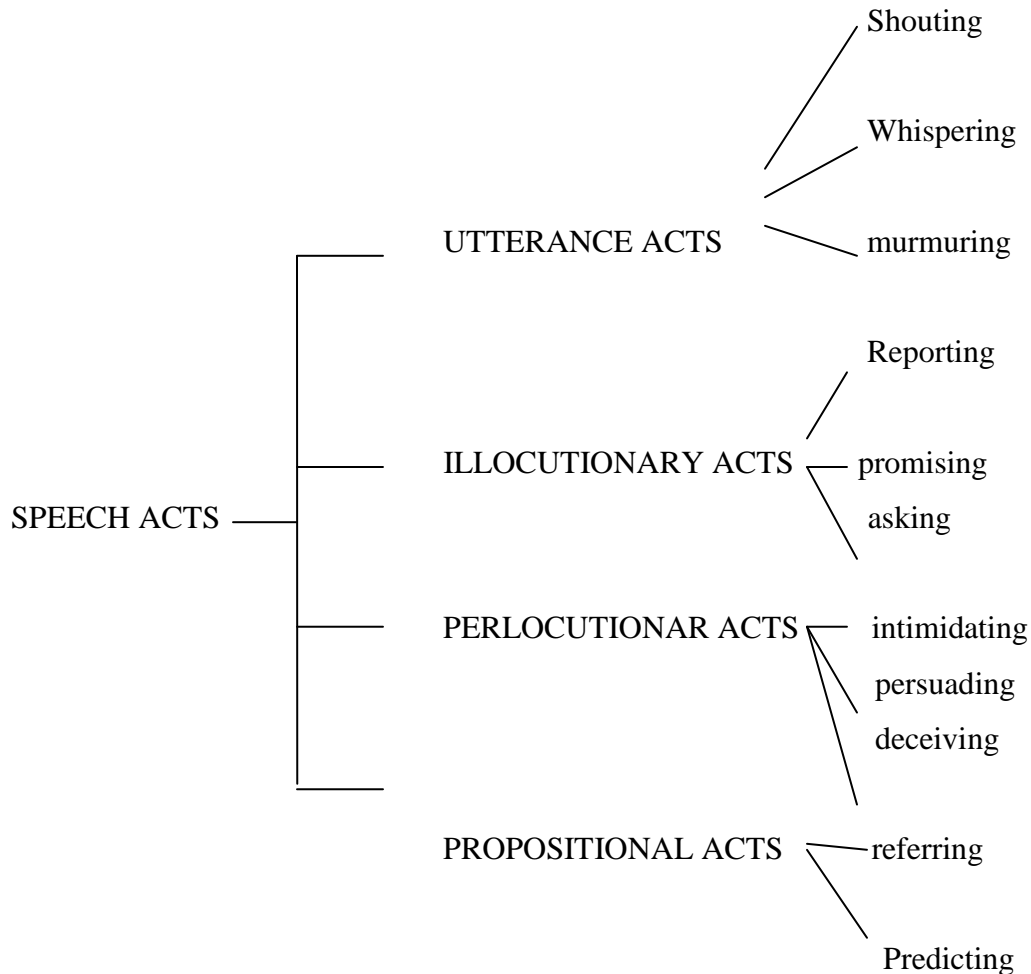

Fig. 1.3 Classification of Speech Act

Searle (1969) systematized Austin's intuitions about felicity with the proposal that for a paper definition of every type of speech act four kinds of conditions, all necessary and together should be specified. They are:

- Propositional content condition: specification of a future state of affairs.
- Preparatory condition: the speaker/ writer has adequate information to form a 'valid' opinion about the future state of affairs.
- Sincerity condition: the speaker/ writer believes that the future state of affairs will indeed be as described.

- Essential condition: the utterance counts as an act committing the speaker/ writer to the likelihood of the future state of affairs to be as described. Austin has already made a distinction between explicit performatives and primary performatives. Explicit performatives are speech acts of the type

23. I promise to go to London

which contain verbs such as 'promise' in the first person singular present. All other forms of utterance, such as

24. I'll go to London

are primary performatives. The performative verbs involved belong to the range of illocutionary force indicating devices (or IFIDs), which also include the sentence type, certain adverbs, aspects of word order, stress and intonation. It is usually assumed that the major sentence types- serving as IFIDs have a typically associated literal force: an assertive for for declarative sentence, a question force for interrogative sentences and a directive force for imperative sentences. When this pattern is broken, as in

25. Can you call me a taxi?

Which is literally a question about the addressee's ability to call a taxi but which functions as a request to do so, the label *indirect speech* is used. In a case like this, the primary illocutionary point is that of a request.

c) *Implicit meaning*

The most significant analysis for meaning has been presented by Grice (1991). For a speaker to mean something by an utterance, the speaker must intend, by that utterance to produce some effect on the audience or the hearer should also be able to comprehend and realize the intention of the speaker.

He was of the view that the notion of what is said that would be useful to pragmatics would involve three ideas: the operative meaning of the expression uttered, the time of utterance and the reference(s) made in the utterance. It is not at all debatable that a speaker intends to communicate more than what he actually says. Grice found a special type of communication labeled 'conversational implicature' because whatever is implied (or implicated) is by the virtue of the fact that actually both hearer and the speaker contribute cooperatively to a conversation.

According to Grice (2008) such conversations are governed by the 'Cooperative Principle' (CP). This CP is composed of some conversational maxims like:

- Quantity- be informative and
- Quality- try to make your contribution to one that is true.

5. Conclusion

Language is not a monolithic entity. It is also not a unified phenomenon. There are distinctions between different manifestations of language use. Every sphere of human activity and every sphere of communication shows some links with a broad range of utterance types which are relatively stable in terms of thematic context, linguistics style, and compositional structure. These are called speech genres. Traditionally, pragmatics has mainly focused on four types of units that could be captured by this label: a significant number of speech act types, conversations of various types, some non- conversational types of speech events, and certain kinds of text. So far, not a single pragmatic theory has been proposed which combines all of these. The point is that, what happens with certain written genres is not derivative of what happens in an informal conversation. Still there is much to do in this linguistic field. Wittgenstein (2001) writes:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not 'command a clear view' of the use of our words.- Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspective. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connexions' hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases. The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.

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Dr. Sweta Sinha, Ph.D. in Linguistics
Centre for Linguistics
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi- 110067
India
apna1982@gmail.com

Mailing Address
Orange County 12/ 1503
Ahinsa Khand I
Indirapuram, Ghaziabad 201012, Uttar Pradesh, India