The Role of Pragmatics in Literary Analysis: Approaching Literary Meaning from a Linguistic Perspective

Kanhaiya Kumar Sinha

Abstract

The present paper aims to produce a detailed account of the term 'pragmatics' and explore, by presenting and reviewing different models, its role in literature as it appears to be evident in different linguistic approaches to the study and analysis of literary genres. It is a fact that various pragmatic approaches such as speech act theory, conversational implicature, politeness theory, and relevance theory are developed mainly in relation to spoken interaction, yet, as some studies suggest, they offer invaluable insights to the study of literary texts. Consequently, the paper also strives to shed some light on the relationship these two terms – literature and pragmatics – enjoy so that their commonalities can be unmasked. It also tries to explore how pragmatics may help find out the 'context' and 'meaning' of literary discourse.

Keywords

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Introduction

Coined in the 1930s by the American philosopher and semiotician, C. W. Morris, and developed as a subfield of linguistics and semiotics in the 1970s, the term 'pragmatics' is a study to explore how context, in a literary text, contributes to meaning. It studies how language is used to express what someone means in particular situations, especially when the actual words used may appear to mean something different (Austin 228). PPragmatics derives its meaning via the Latin word 'pragmatics which comes from Greek 'pragmatikos', meaning amongst others "fit for action" (Leech 13). It focuses on finding out what is not explicitly stated and how utterances can be interpreted in situational contexts. Pragmatics has, nowadays, by introducing a distinct perspective, opened new vistas for domains and fields such as speech and visual communication, critical thinking, rhetoric, reading and listening theories, composition studies, film studies, pictorial perception, informal logic, cognitive psychology, literary theory, education, argumentation, sociology, and psychiatry, etc. Nay, it also offers an athletic ground for work in computer science and artificial intelligence (AI). These days all the hyphenated subfields of linguistics such as socio-linguistics or psycho-linguistics as well as its different components, one of them being morphology – all tend to incorporate a pragmatic perspective in their research.

Pragmatics, as a field of language study and as the youngest discipline of linguistics, is fairly new. But it too has a vulnerable past: from Greek sophists through the medieval nominalists and nineteenth-century pragmatic thinkers to today's workers in various sub-disciplines of linguistics, sociology, psychology, literary research, and other branches of humanities and social sciences. Its origin lies in the philosophy of language and the American philosophical school of pragmatism (Morris). As a discipline within language science, pragmatics' roots lie in the work of H. P. Grice (a British philosopher, 1913-1988) on conversational implicature and the co-operative principle and on the works of Stephen C. Levinson (a British linguist), Penelope Brown (an American anthropological linguist) and Geoffrey Leech (a British linguist) on politeness.

Pragmatics offers a way of exploring how sense can be made of certain texts even when, from a semiotic viewpoint, the text seems to be either incomplete or to have a

different meaning to what is really intended. It focuses on the meaning of two words of a particular time and context. In a dialogue between two persons, the speaker tries to construct the linguistic message and intend a meaning, and the hearer interprets the message and infers the meaning (Brown and Yule 22).To understand it more convincingly, let's consider a sign seen in a children's wear shop window: "Baby sale – lots of bargains" (Crystal 240). Even a common man can, without asking anybody, understand that there are no babies for sale – that what is for sale are items used for babies. And pragmatics allows to find out how this 'meaning beyond the words can be decoded without ambiguity. The extra meaning is there in the aforesaid sentence not because of the semantic aspects of the words themselves but because people share certain contextual knowledge with the writer or the speaker of the text.

There appears to be considerable overlap between pragmatics and sociolinguistics since both share an interest in linguistic meaning as determined by usage in a speech community. However, sociolinguists tend to be more interested in variations in language within such communities. Also, pragmatics tries to understand the relationship between signs and users while semantics tends to focus on the actual objects or ideas to which a word refers and syntax (or 'syntactics') examines relationships among signs or symbols. Semantics is the literal meaning of an idea whereas pragmatics is the implied meaning of the given idea (Morris 401-414). In Linguistics, pragmatics contrasts with syntax and semiotics: syntax deals with forms, semiotics with meaning, and pragmatics with use. It would rather be wiser to regard these three areas as concentric circles because pragmatics can be said to deal with forms and meanings in use: pragmatics is the most comprehensive concept of the three.

Pragmatics is useful to interpret language in an actual context. And literary pragmatics applies the theories of pragmatics for the interpretation of literary languages. There appears to be a link between literary pragmatics and the pragmatics of linguistics and semiotics. Literary pragmatics has emerged as one of the topical movements in today's Literaturwissenschaft (Sell XI). It has, beyond doubt, developed itself into an interesting field but it is better not to lose sight of pragmatics in the general sense. Literary pragmatics may, sometimes, be thought of as addressing only those issues which are specific to literary communication, reading, writing narratives, or poetic fictions. That is, literature has a special communicative context and, therefore, it has its pragmatic specificities. The concepts in literary pragmatics are derived from those of general pragmatics and many of the issues are related to that can be traced in other neighboring pragmatic fields (e.g. the pragmatics of language generally, or the pragmatics of film, etc.) yet they have a specificity, special historical traditions (genres, conventions, etc.) of their own (Levinson 5-35) and that's why literary pragmatics is, generally, called a field in its own right.

But, to limit the pragmatic study of literature to 'literary pragmatics' in the sense of 'what is specific to literature' might prove to be a mistake. This is because literature also portrays or uses many pragmatic dimensions of communication that are not specifically literary. For example, the verbal interaction of the characters is also

pragmalinguistic, although not only literary, in the sense that many pragmatic elements of actual conversations are relevant in the understanding and portraying of functional narrated interactions (A note on 'literary' pragmatics). The same thing applies to non-verbal communications – those are not linguistic and not specifically literary but literary works do use them.

Role of Pragmatics

Pragmatics covers speech act theory, felicity conditions, conversational implicature, conversational maxims, relevance, politeness, phatic expressions, deixis, and other approaches to language behavior in Philosophy, Sociology, Linguistics, and Anthropology (Chapman 142). Pragmatics helps anthropologists relate elements of language to broader social phenomena; it, thus, pervades the field of linguistic anthropology. Because pragmatics, generally, describes the forces in play for a given utterance, it includes the study of power, gender, race, identity, and their interactions with individual speech acts. For example, the study of code-switching is directly related to pragmatics since a switch in code affects a shift in the pragmatic force. Pragmatics involves three major communication skills (Miller 12):

(a) Using language for different purposes such as greeting (e.g. hello, goodbye), informing (e.g. I am going to get a cookie.), promising (e.g. I am going to get you a cookie.), and requesting (e.g. I would like a cookie, please!);

(b) Changing language according to the need of a listener or situation such as talking differently to a baby than to an adult, giving background information to an unfamiliar listener, speaking differently in a classroom than in a playground; and

(c) Following rules for conversations and story-telling such as taking turns in conversation, introducing the topic of conversation, staying on topic, rephrasing when misunderstood, how to use verbal and non-verbal signals, how closely stand to someone when speaking, and how to use facial expressions and eye contacts.

These rules may vary across cultures and within cultures. It is, at the same time, important to understand the rules of one's communication partner too. The British philosopher and developer of the theory of speech acts, J. L. Austin (1911-1960), claims that many utterances are equivalent to actions. When someone says: "I name this ship" or "I now pronounce you man and wife", the utterance creates a new social or psychological reality (Levinson 228). To understand it, let's take one more example:

Sergeant Major: Squad, by the left…left turn. – (1)
Referee: (pointing to the centre circle) Goal! – (2)
Groom: With this thing, I thee wed. – (3)

Here, the above sentences (1) and (2) are very well suggestive of the speech act where an utterance is equivalent to an action whereas the third sentence suggests that speech act where an utterance becomes a social or psychological reality. Authorial utterances are used by playwrights to describe the context of the events, the attitudes of the characters, their relations they enjoy with each other, and also the way they interact. The below given example clearly explains the authorial communicative utterance about the context and the relation among the characters:

> Duke: You are welcome; take your place.
> Are you acquainted with the difference
> That holds this present question in the court?
> Portia: I am informed thoroughly of the cause.
> Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?
> Duke: Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.
> Portia: Is your name Shylock?
> Shylock: Shylock is my name. (The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I, Lines 171-178)

Considering, from the viewpoint of authorial utterance, the communicative interactions between the dramatist and the readers in the above extract, Shakespeare's utterances indicate the functions of and the relationships among the characters involved in the scene. The duke uses his power to perform a coercive speech act to issue orders in the court of law. The same is true for Portia's utterances. She performs her social role as a lawyer which enables her to entertain a certain type of power to which both Antonio and Shylock are obliged to answer accordingly.

Speech act theory broadly explains these utterances as having three parts (Black 17) or aspects:

(a) Locutionary Acts: These are simply the speech acts that take place in an utterance;

(b) Illocutionary Acts: These are the real actions which are performed by the utterances and where saying equals doing as in betting, plighting one's troth, welcoming and warning; and

(c) Perlocutionary Acts: These are the effects of the utterances on a listener who accepts the bet or pledge of marriage, is welcomed or warned.

Felicity preparations are connections necessary to the success of a speech act. 'Felicity' is derived from the Latin word 'Felicitas', taken from the name of the Ancient Roman goddess 'Fortuna' (Behind the Name - Origin, and History of Felicity), meaning "luck, good fortune" (MFnames.com - Origin and Meaning of Felicity). Felicity preparations are the conditions needed for the success or achievement of a performative. Only certain people are qualified to declare war, baptize people, or sentence convicted felons. In some cases, the speaker must be sincere (as in apologizing or vowing). And

external substances must be suitable: "Can you give a lift?" suggests that the hearer has a motor vehicle, can drive it somewhere and that the speaker has a reason for the request. It may be that the utterance is made as a joke or sarcasm, in that case, a different interpretation is in order. Loosely speaking, felicity conditions are of three types (Searle 59):

(a) Preparatory Conditions: These conditions include the status or authority of the speaker to perform a speech act, the situation of other parties, and so on. So, to confirm a candidate the speaker must be a bishop; but a mere priest can baptize people while various ministers and registrars may, in England, solemnize marriages. In the case of marrying, there are other conditions – that neither of the couple is already married, that they make their speech act, and so on. The public sometimes speculates about the status of people who act out (otherwise free to marry) a wedding scene in a play or film. In "Romeo and Juliet", Shakespeare has no worries because the words of the ceremony are not spoken on the stage, and, anyway, Juliet's role is played by a boy (though this may make the wedding scene blasphemous to some in the audience).

(b) Conditions for Execution: These conditions can assume exaggerated importance. People are so used to a ritual or ceremonial action accompanying the speech act that they believe that the act is invalidated if the action is lacking, but there are few real examples of this; and

(c) Sincerity Conditions; At a simple level, these conditions show that the speaker must intend what he or she says. In the case of apologizing or promising, it may be quite impossible for others to know the sincerity of the speaker. Moreover, sincerity, nowadays, as a genuine intention is no assurance that the apologetic attitude will last or that the promise will be kept. There are some speech acts such as plighting one's troth or taking an oath where this sincerity is determined by the presence of witnesses. The one making the promise will not be able later to argue that he or she did not mean it. A more complex example can be taken from a classroom where a teacher asks a question but the pupils suppose that the teacher knows the answer and are, therefore, not sincere in answering it. In the case "Can you, please, tell me about X" may be more acceptable to the pupils than "What is X?" One can, humorously, use one's understanding of sincerity conditions where one asks others or promises oneself to do things which one thinks others know it to be impossible: "Please can you make it a sunny tomorrow?"

Paul Grice outlined, in a series of lectures at Harvard University in 1967, an approach to what he termed as conversational implicature – how hearers manage to work out the complete message when speakers mean more than they say (Grice 26). To understand Grice's idea of conversational implicature, it will quite be proper to take an example: 'Have you got any cash on you?' where the speaker wants the hearer to understand the meaning: 'Can you lend me some money? I don't have much on me'.

The conversational implicature is, thus it becomes clear, a message that is not found in the plain sense of the sentence. The speaker implies it. The hearer can infer (work out, read between the lines) this message in the utterance by appealing to the rules governing successful conversational interactions. Grice proposed that implicatures like the second sentence in the previous paragraph can be calculated from the first by understanding three things:

(1) The usual linguistic meaning of what is said;

(2) Contextual information (shared or general knowledge); and

(3) The assumption that the speaker is obeying what Grice called the co-operative principle.

The achievement of a conversation depends on how the various speakers approach their interactions among themselves. The way in which people try to make their conversations work is, sometimes, called 'the co-operative principle'. One can understand it partly by noting those people who are the exception to the rule and are not capable of making conversation work. One can also, sometimes, find it useful to deliberately infringe or disregard it – as when one receives an unwelcome call from an insurance policy salesperson or where one is being interrogated by a police officer on suspicion of some grave crime.

Paul Grice proposes that in ordinary conversation speakers and hearers share a co-operative principle. Speakers shape their utterances to be understood by the hearers. This principle can better be explained by these four underlying rules (Grice 28) or maxims:

(a) Quality of Utterance: Speakers should be truthful in their utterances. They should not say what they think is false, or make a statement for which they can't produce evidence;

(b) Quantity of Utterance: A contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation to proceed. It should neither be too little nor too much (it is not clear how one can decide the quantity of information that satisfies the maxim in a given case.);

(c) The relevance of Utterance: Speaker's contribution should be related to the purpose of the exchange of interactions; and

(d) Manner of Utterance: Speaker's contribution should be perspicuous, that is, clear, orderly, and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

Let's have a look at an extract taken from "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1964) by Hemingway which is an apt example of co-operative implicature:

'That was a pretty thing to do,' he said in a toneless voice. 'He would have left you too.'
'Stop it,' she said.

'There is a hell of a lot to be done,' he said…'Why didn't you poison him? That's what
They do in England.'
'Stop it, Stop it, Stop it', she said, 'Please, please stop it.' 'That's better,' Wilson said,   'Please is much better. Now I'll stop.'

This implicature of the extract is that a woman has murdered her husband. But how inappropriately Wilson who doesn't know the matter and also doesn't have the evidence addresses the widow. This is a clear violation of 'Quality of Utterance' as well as 'Manner of Utterance' (Black 29).

The 'politeness' principle is a series of maxims that Geoffrey Leech (a British Linguist, 1936-2014) has proposed as a way of explaining how politeness operates in conversational exchanges. Leech defines 'politeness' as a form of behavior that establishes and maintains comity. That is the ability of the participants, in social interaction, to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony. While stating his maxims, Leech uses his terms for two kinds of illocutionary acts. He calls representatives "assertive" and directives, "impositives" (Leech 6).

Some literary pragmatists believe that turn-taking, in a normal social interaction, follows certain conventions and that a very large part of a narrator's speech gets affected by a desire to save face, not only of his/her own but of hearers' or readers' also. That's why it is better for narrators, writers, poets, novelists to avoid suggesting that their audiences' liberties should be, in any way, impinge upon, or that audiences' self-esteem and values questioned. For example, if a doctor asks "Do you think you could drive the car?",   is asking his patient a direct, real question about his manual capability and expecting the answer in affirmative or negative. But if a professor uses the same utterance in an indirect speech act, he/she makes the command seem to be less of an imposition to the students. Thus, it becomes clear that to make one's contributions to discourse as helpful as possible, one should take care of the decency of one's listeners. It would therefore be of an utter surprise if someone doesn't experience such an extended turn as a narrative speech act in terms of its degree of politeness. And many of readers' deepest intuitions about authors do with just this question, representing perhaps the most direct consequence of participation in the literary speech act. It is hardly needed to say that if Dickens is felt cheeky, or George Eliot importunate, or Pope politely impolite, it would be worth trying to pin these impressions down.

Both Howard Jackson (a British Linguist) and Peter Stockwell (a British Sociolinguist) single out 'relevance of utterance' as of greater importance than Grice recognized (Grice gives stress on quality and manner as super maxims) it. Assuming that the co-operative principle is at work in most conversations people can see how hearers will try to find meaning in utterances that seem to be meaningless or irrelevant. People assume that there must be a reason for this. The linguists cite a conversation between a shopkeeper and a 16-year-old customer:

Customer;   Just these, please.

Shopkeeper: Are you eighteen?
Customer: Oh, I am from Middlesbrough.
Shopkeeper: (after a brief pause) OK (serves beer to him) (Jackson and Stockwell 142).

These linguists suggest that "there is no explanation for (the customer's) bizarre reply". This should, perhaps, be qualified: one can't be sure what the explanation is but one can find some plausible answer. They (linguists) seem to recommend that the shopkeeper "derived some inference or other" from the reply given by the teenager since she served him the beer. It might, of course, be that she had questioned (how old is this customer?) once, but when he appeared not to have understood it, was reluctant to ask it again or throw light on it – perhaps because this seemed too much like hard work and the teenager, as a stranger, would be unlikely to attract attention (from the police or trading standard officers) as a regular underage purchaser of beer.

If a language is incapable of conveying the meaning then the discourse uses in the text becomes irrelevant. Hearers and readers make, by assuming inferences on their background knowledge of the context, sense of a text and try to interpret the connections between utterances meaningful. It can better be understood by going through the example taken from "Lord of the Flies" wherein one incident Eric tries to say something to Sam (both are twins):

Eric: "That was near".
Sam: "He'd have been – "
Eric: "Waxy".
Sam: "Huh'.
Eric: "Sam".
Sam: "Huh?"
Eric: "Nothing" (Golding 120-121).

An outsider may not be, by observing the conversation between the twins, able to get the meaning of the talk. However, one may assume that the twins have understood each other and that they are aware of the context too. It is very much apparent that relevancy of language discourse does exist between them lest one could have asked what the other was saying. The context of the talk may be that the twins might have seen something moving at night and they became scared. Consequently, they are unable to utter complete sentences yet both of them fully recognize the effect of communication. Thus, in analyzing utterances and searching for relevance people can use a hierarchy of hypotheses – those that might be presumed, declared, entailed, or inferred from any utterance.

In Linguistics, 'deixis' refers to the phenomena wherein understanding the meaning of words and phrases in an utterance requires contextual information. Words are deictic if their semantic meaning is fixed but their denotational meaning varies depending on time and/ or place. Words or phrases that require contextual information to

convey any meaning are, for example, English pronouns, said to be deictic. The terms 'indexicality' and 'anaphorically' are closely related to deixis (Levinson 54-96).

Possibly, the most common categories of contextual information referred to and what an American Linguist calls the "grammaticalized types" of deixis are those of person, place, and time (Fillmore 112).

Person deixis concerns itself with the grammatical persons involved in an utterance – (a) those directly involved (e.g. the speaker, the addressee), (b) those not directly involved (e.g. over hearers – those who hear the utterance but who are not being directly addressed), and (c) those mentioned in the utterance. The differences are generally, in English, indicated by pronouns:

I am going to the movies.
Would you like to have a cup of tea?
They tried to hurt me but he came to the rescue

Place deixis, also known as space deixis, is concerned with the spatial locations relevant to an utterance. Similar to person deixis, the locations may either be those of the speaker and the addressee or those of persons or objects being referred to. The most salient English examples are the adverbs 'here' and 'there' and the demonstratives 'this' and 'that' – although these are far from being deictic words.

Time, or temporal, deixis is concerned with the various times involved in and referred to in an utterance. This can better be understood by taking note of time adverbs like 'now', 'then', 'soon', and so forth, and also of different tenses. A good example may be the word 'tomorrow' which denotes the consecutive next day after every day.

The utterance of 'phatic' expression is a kind of speech act. In Roman Jakobson's (American-Russian Linguist, 1896-1982) work, 'phatic' communication is that which concerns the channel of communication, for instance when one says, "I can't hear you, you are breaking up" in the middle of a telephonic conversation (Jacobson 358). These types of uses of phatic communication appear, for example, in research on online communications and micro-blogging.

In speech communication, the term 'phatic' means "small talk"(a conversation for its own sake) and has also been called "grooming talking". For example, 'you are welcome' is not supposed to pass the message that the hearer is welcome; it is, rather, a phatic response to being thanked which functions, in turn, as an acknowledgment of the receipt of a benefit. Similarly, the question "how are you?" is generally an involuntary courtesy of a social encounter. Although many times this question, "how are you?", is asked in a sincere, concerned manner and does assume a detailed response related to the respondent's present state - this needs to be pragmatically inferred from context and intonation.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis it can be said that pragmatics appears to be a recent and well-organized way of shedding light on contextual language. It seeks to explain different aspects of meaning which are not found in the plain sense of words or structures as explained by Semantics. A non-complicated system of taking note of pragmatics is to acknowledge, for example, that it needs to keep the language interesting, that is, a speaker or writer should not bore his/her, listener or reader, for example, by being over-long or monotonous. So, it becomes very clear that human beings strive to find linguistic means to make a text, perhaps, shorter, more interesting, more relevant, more philosophical, or more personal. And, pragmatics allows this. Some people may opine that pragmatics does not have a clear-cut focus. Its principles are vague and fuzzy and that it appears to be redundant as Semantics already adequately cover the territory. But, it is to be noted that the study of speech acts has illuminated social language interactions. Pragmatics takes care of things that Semantics has, previously, brushed aside. Pragmatics can help inform strategies for teaching language and that it has given new insights into understanding Literature. Therefore, it should be noted that in a global pragmatic analysis of a literary work one should take note of both what is specifically literary and what is not specifically literary but is, nevertheless, relevant to Literature at the level of the character's communication or the level of communication between author and reader or speaker and hearer.

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The Article