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**Gabriel-Dan Bărbuleț**

***PRAGMATICS***  
***A Linguistic Study***  
***Revised and Annotated Edition***



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**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**

**BĂRBULEȚ, GABRIEL-DAN**

**Pragmatics : a linguistic study** / Gabriel-Dan Bărbuleț. - Rev. and annotated ed.. - București : Pro Universitaria, 2025

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-26-2147-6

81

**Referenți științifici:**

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Editura Pro Universitaria



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e-mail: comenzi@ujmag.ro

www.ujmag.ro



Ujmag.ro

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## Introduction

Language is more than a vehicle for transmitting information, it is a medium for building social relationships, negotiating meaning, asserting identity, expressing politeness, navigating power, and managing face. While semantics tells us what sentences mean in the abstract, pragmatics is concerned with what speakers mean when they use language in real-world contexts. It focuses on how language users create and interpret meaning in interaction, taking into account a range of contextual, cultural, cognitive, and social factors.

This course introduces students to pragmatics as a dynamic and interdisciplinary field within linguistics. It begins with foundational theories, such as speech act theory (Austin, Searle), Grice's cooperative principle and conversational implicature, and presupposition theory and moves toward contemporary applications in domains such as intercultural communication, digital interaction, political discourse, and language education. In doing so, it offers a holistic exploration of how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and manipulated across a wide range of communicative contexts.

## Aims and Scope

The primary aim of this course is to equip students with both theoretical knowledge and analytical tools to understand how language functions in interaction. Pragmatics examines not only what is said, but how, why, to whom, and with what effect. The course emphasizes that communication is never purely linguistic; it

is always embedded in a web of social norms, cultural expectations, power relations, and interpersonal dynamics.

## Core Topics and Trajectory

The course follows a structured yet flexible trajectory, beginning with foundational concepts and gradually integrating complex themes and real-world applications. Major topics include:

- Speech Acts and Communicative Intentions: How language functions as action, from requesting and apologizing to promising and refusing.
- Conversational Implicature: How hearers infer unstated meanings based on contextual reasoning and the flouting of conversational maxims.
- Presupposition and Entailment: How speakers take for granted certain assumptions, and how these shape discourse interpretation.
- Deixis and Indexicality: How language points to aspects of the context, time, place, identity, through expressions like “here,” “you,” or “tomorrow.”
- Politeness, Facework, and (Im)politeness Theories: How language maintains or threatens social harmony, and how cultural norms mediate these strategies.
- Multimodal Pragmatics: How gesture, prosody, facial expression, and spatial behavior contribute to pragmatic meaning.
- Pragmatics in Digital Communication: How online language use reshapes norms of politeness, turn-taking, and tone through emojis, ellipses, memes, and multimodal cues.
- Intercultural Pragmatics: How pragmatic norms vary across cultures and languages, and how misunderstandings arise from pragmatic transfer or mismatch.

- Power and Ideology in Pragmatic Framing: How language is used to assert control, shape public perception, and construct social reality, especially in political and media discourse.
- Pragmatics in Educational Settings: How pragmatic competence is taught, learned, and assessed in language classrooms and professional training contexts.

Each topic is accompanied by a set of illustrative examples, drawn from spoken interaction, literature, film, media, and corpora, as well as targeted analytical activities designed to encourage application, critique, and reflection.

## The Importance of Pragmatic Awareness

Pragmatic competence is increasingly recognized as a core component of communicative competence. It is essential not only for language learners but for anyone operating in a multilingual, multicultural, and digitally mediated world. Miscommunication, offense, and exclusion often occur not because of incorrect grammar, but because of misinterpreted intentions, inappropriate tone, or cultural divergence in politeness norms.

In this sense, pragmatics is not merely an academic discipline; it is a form of social literacy, empowering individuals to navigate communicative complexity with awareness, flexibility, and empathy. Developing pragmatic awareness means becoming attuned to the subtleties of language-in-use, to what is implied rather than said, and to how meaning is co-constructed in every act of communication.

By combining linguistic analysis with social critique and cultural awareness, the course aims to foster both intellectual insight and practical skill.

In addition to its theoretical foundations, the course also addresses the ethical dimensions of pragmatic behavior. Pragmatic choices are rarely neutral; they reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, cultural ideologies, and power asymmetries. For instance, the decision to speak indirectly, use hedges, or remain silent can signal deference, resistance, or strategic politeness, depending on the speaker's position and the social context. Students will be encouraged to explore how pragmatic norms intersect with issues of gender, class, race, and institutional authority, and to consider the ethical implications of communicative decisions in real-life scenarios.

Moreover, the course integrates a multilingual and multicultural perspective, foregrounding the diversity of pragmatic systems across languages and communities. Drawing on examples from English, French, Mandarin, Arabic, and other languages, students will examine how speech acts, politeness conventions, and turn-taking strategies differ cross-linguistically. This comparative lens helps to reveal the culturally embedded nature of pragmatic competence and prepares learners to interact sensitively and effectively in globalized and multicultural environments.

One distinctive feature of the course is its emphasis on data-driven inquiry. Students will work with transcribed interactions, audiovisual materials, and digital discourse samples to identify pragmatic patterns, evaluate speaker intentions, and reflect on their own interpretative assumptions. Through hands-on tasks and peer collaboration, learners develop both analytical rigor and interpretative flexibility which are key skills in any field where

communication is central, from education and business to law and public policy.

To further support applied learning, the course includes scaffolded assignments that culminate in a final research project. This project invites students to select a real-world communicative context, such as courtroom testimony, customer service interaction, or a social media exchange and conduct a detailed pragmatic analysis. By integrating theory with authentic language use, students gain confidence in applying pragmatic tools to new contexts and develop a nuanced appreciation of communication as a socially embedded, strategic, and dynamic process.

Finally, the course is designed to evolve in response to students' interests and real-time events. Instructors are encouraged to incorporate current examples from politics, media, education, or interpersonal life that illuminate key concepts and challenge students to reflect on their own roles as communicators. In this way, the course fosters not only academic engagement but personal growth, encouraging learners to become ethically aware, critically minded, and pragmatically competent participants in today's complex communicative world.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to Pragmatics

Language is not merely a system of rules or a collection of words strung together to convey information. It is, above all, a tool for interaction, deeply rooted in the context of its use. While syntax and semantics focus on structure and meaning respectively, pragmatics is concerned with language in action, how speakers mean more than they say, how hearers understand more than is explicitly stated, and how context shapes interpretation.

To begin with, pragmatics can be defined as the study of meaning in context. It deals with the way speakers use language to achieve communicative goals and how listeners infer meaning from what is said. Unlike semantics, which is preoccupied with meaning encoded in linguistic forms, pragmatics addresses meaning as it is constructed in interaction. Thus, a sentence may be semantically clear but pragmatically ambiguous, or vice versa, depending on the situation in which it is used.

Historically, the emergence of pragmatics as a distinct field can be traced to the 20th century, with the development of philosophical and linguistic theories that challenged the idea that meaning resides solely in words. Pioneers like Charles Morris, Paul Grice, and John Searle emphasized that understanding language requires attention to speaker intention, inference, and shared knowledge. From this perspective, language is dynamic and relational rather than static and absolute.

One of the fundamental concerns of pragmatics is the question of how context influences interpretation. Consider the utterance "Can you pass the salt?" Semantically, this is a question about ability.

Pragmatically, it is understood as a polite request. Such a transformation in interpretation is only possible because both speaker and listener rely on contextual cues and shared assumptions about communicative norms. Without this implicit agreement, much of human communication would be ineffective.

Another example is the statement "You're going to wear that?" On the surface, it is a question. However, pragmatically, it is more likely to be interpreted as criticism or disapproval, depending on tone, facial expression, and the relationship between the speakers. In this case, the true intention lies beneath the literal meaning and is accessible only through pragmatic inference.

Similarly, the phrase "Nice job!" can be either a genuine compliment or sarcastic criticism, again depending on intonation, facial cues, and contextual expectations. If said in response to a clumsy mistake, the utterance is likely sarcastic; if said after a presentation, it is likely sincere. Pragmatics helps us distinguish between these possibilities by paying close attention to the situation of use.

A third example involves an announcement such as "We're out of coffee." In a workplace setting, this might be interpreted as a complaint, a request to restock, or a simple piece of information. The speaker's tone, the context of previous interactions, and the listener's expectations will guide interpretation. Thus, meaning is never static, it emerges in context and through interaction.

Moreover, pragmatics encompasses a variety of phenomena including deixis, implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and politeness, all of which contribute to the richness of everyday communication. These concepts, though diverse, share a common emphasis on interactional meaning. They allow us to move beyond the literal, to explore the nuanced and often subtle ways in which language functions within social contexts.

Equally important is the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic context. The linguistic context refers to the surrounding discourse, while the non-linguistic context includes elements such as physical setting, speaker-hearer relationships, cultural norms, and shared knowledge. Effective communication depends on the interplay of both. For instance, the phrase "I'll do it tomorrow" can only be fully understood with reference to when and where it was said, and who the speaker and listener are.

Furthermore, pragmatics is not confined to spoken language. Written texts, digital communication, and even non-verbal cues rely on pragmatic competence. A text message that reads "Sure." may be interpreted as enthusiastic agreement or reluctant compliance depending on punctuation, prior interaction, and tone, which in digital contexts must often be inferred.

In summary, pragmatics is indispensable to our understanding of language as a social activity. It bridges the gap between linguistic form and human intention, between utterance and interpretation. As we move through the chapters that follow, we will explore in depth the key topics and tools of pragmatic analysis, always grounded in real-world examples and interactive exercises that challenge us to think critically about how language works in context.

## Practical Exercises

Read the following short dialogues and answer the questions that follow each one.

1. A: Are you coming to the meeting tomorrow?
2. B: I have a dentist appointment.
  - a. What does B mean? Is this a direct or indirect response? Why?

- b. How does context help you understand B's answer?
3. A: It's cold in here.
4. B: I'll close the window.
- Is A making a statement or a request? What cues support your interpretation?
  - Would this exchange make sense in all contexts?
5. A: Wow, you really aced that exam.
6. B: Yeah, after studying all night.
- What pragmatic cues suggest whether B's response is sincere or ironic?
  - Could this be a humble acknowledgment or a complaint in disguise?
7. A: Do you want to go out for dinner?
8. B: I have a lot of work to do.
- Is B refusing directly or indirectly? How can we infer their intention?
  - How would this be interpreted differently by a close friend versus a colleague?
9. A: The trash hasn't been taken out.
10. B: I'm doing it now.
- Is A stating a fact or implying a command?
  - What role does shared household context play in shaping this interpretation?
11. A: Have you finished the report?
12. B: I've been in meetings all day.
- What is B implying? Is this a direct or indirect answer? Why?
  - What assumptions does the listener need to make to interpret B's response?

13. A: The neighbors are being loud again.
14. B: I'll go have a word with them.
- Is B's reply a direct response to a request or a voluntary offer?
  - How does shared context about prior noise issues help in interpreting this exchange?
15. A: Can you help me move this table?
16. B: I just got back from the gym.
- What is B trying to communicate? Is it an excuse or a refusal?
  - Could this be interpreted differently depending on B's tone?
17. A: Did you like the film?
18. B: The popcorn was good.
- What does B's response suggest? Is this an example of implicature?
  - What role does the principle of relevance play in understanding this reply?
19. A: I might be late to the dinner.
20. B: As usual.
- How would you classify B's response, i.e. literal or sarcastic?
  - How do prior interactions and speaker relationship affect how this is received?

These exercises are designed to highlight how pragmatic understanding allows us to interpret speaker intentions, even when they are not explicitly stated. They also demonstrate how language users rely on shared knowledge, social norms, and contextual clues to navigate communication effectively.