



ELSEVIER

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

Journal of Pragmatics 37 (2005) 1355–1371

Journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Pragmemes (a study with reference to English and Italian)

Alessandro Capone

*Department of General Linguistics, University of Messina, Private address:
Via S. Francesco de Paola, 105, 98051 Barcellona, P.G. (ME), Italy*

Received 18 May 2004; received in revised form 15 January 2005; accepted 25 January 2005

Abstract

In this paper I shall argue that we have to focus on units of pragmatic analysis such as the pragmeme. A pragmeme is a situated speech act in which the rules of language and of society combine in determining meaning, intended as a socially recognized object sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which the utterance to be interpreted is embedded. Given a sequence of utterances, literally interpretable as having certain meanings and goals, features of the situation are utilized to produce pragmatic inferences, thus completing or expanding a minimal proposition vocalized by an utterance; other features of the context of utterance, in the form of defeasible or otherwise non-cancellable aspects of meaning, will transform the literal signification of an utterance, imposing the stamp of the situation on it, making certain rules of interpretation relevant to it, and constituting a set of constraints that strictly enforce certain readings by discarding or eliminating others. In this paper, after expatiating on studies that advocate the importance of studying the context of use of a speech act, I offer analytic considerations on what seem to me interesting cases of pragmemes.

© 2005 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Keywords: Speech acts; Situated linguistic uses; Pragmemes; Illocutionary force; Non-cancellable rules of inference

1. Preamble

Two persons meet in the street. They know each other. Once they were friends; then they stopped being on speaking terms. One of them talks to the other. We need not know the

E-mail address: sandro.capone@tin.it.

0378-2166/\$ – see front matter © 2005 Published by Elsevier B.V.

doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2005.01.013

specific literal content of his utterance. However, we know how to understand his message — it counts as an attempt to resume the old friendship.

The above example (which is due to Sorin Stati, in personal communication) has always had a strong influence on my formation as a linguist. This influence, as well as Mey's novel idea of the pragmeme (to be discussed below) has triggered the considerations on the societal dimension of utterance interpretation which follow.

Here is an excerpt from Mey (2001), which promises to expand considerably the horizons of societal linguistics:

Speech acts, in order to be effective, have to be situated. That is to say, they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized. Thus, a situated speech act comes close to what has been called a speech event in ethnographic and anthropological studies (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974): speech as centered on an institutionalized social activity of a certain kind, such as teaching, visiting a doctor's office, participating in a tea-ceremony, and so on. In all such activities, speech is, in a way, prescribed: only certain utterances can be expected and will thus be acceptable; conversely, the participants in the situation, by their acceptance of their own and others' utterances, establish and reaffirm the social situation in which the utterances are uttered and in which they find themselves as utterers. (Mey, 2001: 219)

A similar stance is taken by Caffi (2002):

The challenge for pragmatics is to capture “the point where language and the world intersect: in the linguistic situation” (Weinrich, 1966: 17), the discourse in its development, the unfolding linguistic action while it modifies (or attempts to modify) the context and the various kinds of participant roles contributing to this development, whether considered merely as discourse (Ducrot) or also given extra-linguistic status. (Caffi, 2002: 9; translation mine, see also Capone, 2004c)

Such considerations are also echoed by Verschueren (1999):

In isolation, just all utterances are highly indeterminate because of the multiplicity of contextual constellations they can fit into. Far from introducing vagueness, allowing context into linguistic analysis is therefore a prerequisite for precision. As said before, however, we should avoid the mistake of reifying or petrifying context. (Verschueren, 1999: 111–112)

2. Towards situated analyses of speech acts

In this section, I shall situate the analysis of speech acts within a linguistics paradigm that places great importance on the context of utterance and amplification — the exploitation of the situation of use in order to enrich the interpretation of utterances. First of all, I shall start with the definition of the pragmeme; then I shall move on to a cursory review of the most significant studies of situated speech acts.

2.1. *The definition of a pragmeme*

A pragmeme is a speech act — an utterance whose goal is to bring about effects that modify a situation and change the roles of the participants within it or to bring about other types of effect, such as exchanging/assessing information, producing social gratification or, otherwise, rights/obligations and social bonds.

Such a speech act is situated. This means that the specific form which the utterance takes interacts with features of the cotext and with the situation of utterance, including the rules entailed by the latter that jointly determine (or contribute to determining) the global significance of the act in question. If we ask how the features of the cotext interact with the context (certainly a reasonable question), then the answer could be that sometimes, the cotext offers clues that allow the recipient to know what the context is, while otherwise, when it is not possible to deduce what the context is just from an analysis of the cotext, our a priori knowledge of the context guides the understanding of the cotext. Given a sequence of utterances, literally interpretable as having a certain meaning and a certain goal, features of the situation may serve to produce pragmatic inferences, thus completing or expanding a minimal proposition presented by an utterance; other features of the context of utterance, in the form of defeasible or otherwise non-cancelable aspects of meaning, will transform the literal signification of an utterance, imposing the stamp of the situation on it, making certain rules of interpretation relevant to it, and constituting a set of constraints that strictly enforce certain readings by discarding or eliminating other, irrelevant interpretative options.

A pragmeme is a situated speech act in which the rules of language and of society synergize in determining meaning, intended as a socially recognized object, sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which the utterance to be interpreted is embedded. A pragmeme always requires three types of embedding: the embedding of an utterance in a context of use, with an aim to determine the referential anchors that complete the propositional form of the utterance; the embedding in rules that systematically transform whatever gets said in a context into whatever is meant there, in conformity with the social constraints and rules bearing on the utterance in question; the embedding in the cotext, whose features are transferred onto the utterance by eliminating semantic or otherwise interpretative ambiguities and enriching further its (range of) interpretations, by making them more specific.

2.2. *Language and communicative competence*

In this paper, we adopt the not too implausible hypothesis that one of the purposes of language is communication. As Dummett (2003) writes (commenting on Strawson), “our conclusion should be, rather, that our original question, which of these two [language as a vehicle of thought or language as a vehicle of communication] is the primary function of language, was misconceived: and that both contestants in Strawson’s heroic struggle are in error”. (Dummett, 2003a: 185)

So it is safe to assume that there are important interactions between the norms of interpretation applicable to discourse types and certain situations of use, and the semantics rules of a language, following Hymes (1962). As Mey (2001: 219) says:

The theory of pragmatic acts does not try to explain language use from the inside out, from words having their origin in a sovereign speaker and going out to an equally sovereign hearer (. . .). Rather, its explanatory movement is from the outside in: the focus is 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 on the situation, as well as on what is actually being said. (Mey, 2001: 219)

That there are norms for interpreting utterances above the sentence level has been demonstrated by Gumperz (1977), who in his cross-cultural work analyzes misunderstandings between speakers abiding by different cultural norms. Such norms of interpretation are culture-dependent, which shows that Verschueren (1987: 36) is right in his claim that pragmatics constitutes a radical departure from traditional views of linguistics, as it involves connections with other areas such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. The fact that the norms for the interpretation of pragmemes come from a societal perspective on language supports such a view. Usually, the norms tied to certain types of discourse are added to the compositional rules of a language; however, it might be closer to the truth to say that they organize them, often modifying them considerably in the process. It is not unreasonable to consider these norms of use as belonging to what Stalnaker (2002) calls the ‘common ground’ (perhaps stretching his notion a bit).

Not surprisingly, Levinson (1983: 356) sees a possible solution to what has been called ‘the indirect speech act problem’ (cf. Mey, 2001: 219) in the analysis of the structure of conversation — even though he should have added that it is the norms of certain discourse types that constrain the interpretation of an utterance in a given structure. Other scholars have proceeded in this direction by stressing the ‘transformative power’ of context in assigning specific illocutionary forces to utterances. Atkinson et al. (1978) is an example of a study that identifies discourse types by showing the kind of rules that are operative in transforming a token such as ‘Right’ into an illocutionary type having the function of reconvening a meeting. Similarly, Capone (2001) provides many examples of the context transforming certain utterance types and the forces usually associated with them. Capone deals specifically with assertions and the various transformations determining a speaker’s commitment to a proposition, seen as functions of the contexts in which the assertions are uttered. He goes so far as to claim that, in a specific context/discourse type such as that of the court, a declarative utterance is transformed into a speech act with legal implications (such as in testimony) that go beyond those involved in a mere assertion (or narrative).

Other examples of how the interpretation of an utterance is determined by certain norms implicit in a particular discourse type are offered (within the philosophy of language) by Dummett (2003b: 214). In fact, this author maintains (correctly, in my opinion) that questions in high school or university examinations follow different rules from those of ordinary discourse, since the questioner pretends not to know the answer to the question. Dummett goes on to say:

We cannot even say that he [the examiner] wants, or represents himself as wanting, the person addressed to give the answer: he may be hoping that he will stand tongue-tied (. . .).

Dummett also offers important considerations on the conventions in force at the theater. Let us consider what happens on the stage from curtain rise to curtain fall:

The assertoric force is not exactly *cancelled* by this [theater] convention, since the audience, if they are to follow the play, must be able to tell the difference between the *character's* making an assertion and his asking a question, but it is, as it were, transposed by the convention, so that the audience understands that the actor is not making an assertion, but acting the making of one. (Dummett, 2003b: 212)

Dummett also considers a particular use of interrogative sentences, as not calling for an answer — something which is seldom commented on:

The use I am alluding to is distinct from the asking of rhetorical questions; a rhetorical question may be taken as the use of an interrogative sentence to make an assertion; but in the course of a speech or a lecture, or a piece of writing, a speaker may pose a question, not rhetorical in this sense, nor calling for an answer from his audience, but merely as a preliminary to giving an answer or to saying something toward an answer: the question serves to point the direction of the ensuing remarks. (Dummett, 2003b: 207)

It seems clear that Dummett's considerations agree with Goffman's view of the lecture as a type of discourse where norms differ from those of daily interaction; as an example consider the protracted assignment of a turn to the participant who gives an invited talk (Goffman, 1981).

2.3. *An integrated approach to communication*

In this paper, my aim is to make explicit the common thread which unifies studies belonging to heterogeneous traditions (sociology, conversation analysis, philosophy of language) by combining those considerations with a classical, Tarskian-like picture of semantics (complemented by similarly classical, Gricean and post-Gricean pragmatics), and finally turning to explicit theoretical constructions such as the 'pragmeme'.

As language users, we are equipped with a knowledge of the lexicon and of the principles and rules of grammar allowing us to form and decode sentences on the basis of semantic compositionality. In the traditional account of language understanding, we form hypotheses about what a sentence means in virtue of the words used and of the combinatorial relations employed, gradually filling the gap between the abstract semantics of a sentence and the intention with which it is uttered in a given context; we do this by first of all constructing the explicatures (in the sense of Carston, 2002) and then making plausible reasonings about the potential and actual implicatures.¹

I believe we may be allowed to extend this traditional view to include a new account of the way context serves to transform meaning — an account that views context as not merely adding further layers of meaning to utterance interpretation. The transformations are not realized in accordance with inferential procedures grounded in pragmatic

¹ For an alternative view on this question (which belongs in the larger framework of the semantics/pragmatics debate), see Levinson (2000), who does not distinguish between implicatures and explicatures.

principles, but are based on knowledge of a number of principled and conventional interactions between utterance meaning and certain contextual and situational configurations (Levinson, 1979). Presumably, such transformations rest on societal norms, which can be studied systematically by observing the communicative behavior of the members of a linguistic community (Duranti, 1992). I have called these transformations (freely adopting a terminology due to Mey, 2001), “pragmemes”, that is, sequentially organized algorithms that reshape the original illocutionary value of a speech act by adding contextual layers of meaning, or even may change the illocutionary value of the speech act.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to define the term ‘context’. Here, I propose to follow Gross (2001: 26), who says that “contexts are just (representations of) bundles of facts. There is no sense to inquiring into their proper individuation without an idea of what questions we hope to answer in part through advertent to context”. According to Gross (2001), we want contexts to be complete with respect to the task of determining the proposition expressed by an utterance and its illocutionary force; we want them to be epistemically illuminating (we expect their bearing on the proposition expressed or on its illocutionary force to be apparent to normal speakers of the language); contexts should be finite and they must be characterized in context-insensitive terms.

In addition to this philosophical conception of the context of utterance, we can also make use of the more recent view advanced by Duranti (2001a,b) that:

Context (...) is no longer understood as an independent variable (e.g. a speaker’s social status) or a given backdrop against which to analyze linguistic forms, but as the product of specific ways of behaving. Participants in an interaction are constantly and mostly implicitly preoccupied with defining the context against which their actions should be interpreted. The analyst’s job is to reconstruct such a process of contextualization (...) while being conscious of the fact that analysis itself is a form of contextualization. (Duranti, 2001a,b: 28)

Duranti remarks that not all elements of the context of utterance are used in the process of making sense of actions (linguistic actions included), but that only a limited amount of information is used and brought to bear on the interpretation of actions, by some process of *highlighting* and *articulating representations* of the most salient features that bear on construing a particular action in a certain way.

Using this notion of context, we can hope to advance our understanding of pragmemes. My view of pragmemes is closely akin to Geis’s view of speech acts, according to which there are broad mappings (or correlations) between sentence types and illocutionary forces (or types of illocutionary force), and that the appeal to the context serves to determine the specific meaning accruing to the situated use of a literal speech act (Geis, 1995; see also Mey, 2001). The difference between my approach and the one by Geis is that, in addition to the defeasible aspects of meaning (identified as the ‘point’ of an utterance; Dummett, 2003b: 210), I also consider certain non-defeasible aspects of meaning. These latter aspects derive from the interaction between the context, the discourse type, and the utterance type in question; the assumption is that there are *non-defeasible discourse rules* strictly determining such mappings. Pragmemes, as far as I know, involve both defeasible and non-defeasible inferences.

3. Examples of pragmemes

In this section, I would like to provide an empirical basis for the study of pragmemes, by showing that certain analytical considerations are to be gleaned from the careful investigation of instances of situated speech acts in which conventional elements provide a substantial enrichment of the basic, literal speech act proffered. Here, I will limit myself to describing some modest theoretical results, based on empirical observations within the context of social interaction. The heroes of this paper are, therefore, not isolated sentences (“linguistic orphans” in the sense of Goffman, 1976), but utterances embedded in the social situation which made them appropriate in the first place.

3.1. “*Vienil*”

Consider an Italian classroom situation, where a teacher says *Vienil* (“Come!”) to a student. A literal interpretation will not do in this case. It is not sufficient for the student to approach the teacher and to stay somewhere close to her. This is not mainly what is intended (although it may be intended as well). What the teacher means, and what the student understands perfectly well, in virtue of a convention pertaining both to the language and to the situation at hand, is that the teacher wants the student to answer a question. Sometimes, the questioning will require the student to physically approach the teacher (by moving to a location of closer contact); at other times the student will simply be required to remain seated and be questioned “at a distance” (*dalposto*). So, too literal an understanding of *Vieni* will not do in this case, because the act of approaching is not an essential element of the response to the teacher’s command, which simply concerns the questioning and the student’s disposition at the time of the command.

Now consider the possible responses to the command. If the student replies *Non vengo* (“I’m not coming”), this does not mean that she has no intention of approaching the teacher. More plausibly, she means that she is not ready to answer the teacher’s questions, possibly because she has not done her homework. Such a response will allow the teacher to give the student a bad grade — even though it is not absolutely clear whether or not she actually has studied, and hence could be well prepared. *Non vengo* may simply mean that the student either is not (or not too well) prepared, or that she prefers to be asked some other time. So, if the teacher wants to eliminate such doubts, she has to ask *Hai studiato oppure no?* (“Did you not study?”). Interestingly, some students will reply *L’ho letto* (“I have read it”)² to the question *Hai studiato?* (“Did you study?”). It is not quite clear what to make of this utterance, as this may be interpreted as “I have not studied it properly” or as “I have tried my best to understand”. Inferential pragmatics does not really come to our aid here. One may, in fact, read a text without actually grasping it or without focusing on it; indeed, one may read an entire passage while having one’s thoughts on something else. Given the scale ⟨learn, study, read⟩, one could infer from the usage of the weaker item (‘read’) that the person in question has not really studied the passage in question, let alone learned anything (Gazdar, 1979; Levinson, 1983). But this is not what we should infer in this context. What we are supposed to understand is that the student has made an effort to

² See the interesting and profound discussion on reading by Wittgenstein (1953: 66–69).

study the lesson, but that she is not completely sure that she has grasped it. Hence, it is the teacher's task to check the appropriate understanding on the part of the student.

Why does one have to say *Vieni?* when one wants to ask a student a question? Considering that interaction is organized systematically, and that sequences are usually orderly, presenting slots in which the sequential order has an interactional significance, it would be sufficient for the teacher to mention a student's name (or surname) to let her understand that she will be asked a question.³ Here, as I said, the sequential placement of the mentioning is essential. Consider that the teacher, at the beginning of the class, checks who is present or absent; this is done by means of a roll call. Contrary to this initial mentioning, naming a student after the initial mentioning sequence has been completed means that the student concerned may expect a question. Of course, mentioning a student's name in this situation is not totally unambiguous: e.g. when a student is chatting with her desk mate, the teacher will have to call her to order, and an obvious way to do this is by mentioning the student's name, even without actually making a remark. Under these circumstances, mentioning a student's name will count as a scolding. The student may either reply by acknowledging the remark (by saying *Scusi*) or by challenging it (*Non ho detto niente* ("I didn't say anything")). The very ambiguity of the mentioning has, of course, also a strategic potential, as the teacher may maintain that she did not really mean to utter an accusation, and therefore does not have to retract it.

3.2. "I saw you"

I now want to discuss another example of language use in which the macro-aspects of the situation contribute to transforming the illocutionary potential of an utterance. Elsewhere, I have discussed the utterance "I saw you" in the context of a story by the Italian author Italo Calvino (Capone, 2004a: 33–36). Within the theoretical apparatus of Gricean pragmatics, I argued there that the standard illocutionary force of this particular utterance (both in Italian and in its English translation) is that of an accusation. There are, however, special contexts in which the utterance may acquire a different illocutionary force.

Let's look at the game played by children (usually under 10 years old), called 'hide-and-peek'. In this game, one of the children has to count up to (say) 20, with her eyes shut, facing a wall or a tree. Upon finishing the count, the child must then look for the other children. Upon spotting one of them, she calls out "I saw you", and runs back to the place where the game started (wall or tree). The child who gets there first, wins. Now, first, what is the (interactional) import of "I saw you" in this situation? Then, do we start from the literal meaning and proceed until we arrive at the socially situated meaning? Finally, do the literal and the socially situated meanings diverge? In answering these questions, we must keep in mind that it is not altogether clear that we are faced here with a crucial divergence. But what *is* the socially situated meaning of "I saw you"? From an informational point of view, "I saw you" is totally purposeless in the game situation, as visual contact ensures that in the standard case, it is obvious, both to the speaker and to the addressee, that the latter has been spotted (of course, there may be situations in which a physical obstacle prevents this

³ I am not using 'mention' in the sense of Lyons to contrast 'mention' to 'use'. By 'mention', here, I just mean something like 'vocalize' or 'utter as a token of a linguistic expression'.

mutual vision). In the game, however, the purpose associated with the utterance is to initiate a sequence in which two children start running at the same time to the same place. In its performative aspects, the utterance roughly amounts to “Let’s start running”. The socially embedded meaning is not at odds with the literal meaning — after all, the assertion “I saw you” provides the reason for initiating the running sequence.

Another situation in which it is possible to observe utterances such as “I saw you” is the classroom. The teacher notices that Michelangelo (his favorite student) whispers the answer to a question to his desk mate. The teacher says “I saw you”. This is not just an accusation, but an order to Michelangelo to stop what he is doing. How can this speech act be transformed into the pragmeme “stop prompting”? It is the social situation, with its rules and expectations governing students’ obligations and teachers’ tasks, that promotes the *inhibitive interpretation* of “I saw you”. In this context, it is out of the question that the utterance could count as a compliment — such an interpretation simply cannot occur. In fact, no matter how highly the teacher thinks of Michelangelo (maybe even admiring him for wanting to help his fellow students), and even though Michelangelo knows that the teacher has this positive opinion about him, it is unlikely that he will choose the tortuous path of individual interpretation and proceed from considerations about his teacher’s high esteem for him to the interpretation that the speech act counts as a compliment. Michelangelo will almost certainly prefer the social path of interpretation to his own individual path (Jaszczolt, 1999). Thus, he is able to work out that the teacher, despite his high opinion of him, actually wants him to stop whispering answers to his desk mate. I think that this example nicely instantiates Bilmes’s remark that the context is the total social setting in which the speech event takes place, the meaning of an utterance being determined by its place in an interactional sequence (Bilmes, 1986: 127). It also provides support for Mey’s view that users and their language are at the core of all things pragmatic, the world of users being the very condition for doing pragmatics (Mey, 2001: 29; see also Capone, 2004b).

3.3. “Can I help you?”

Consider now the service encounter situation. A shop assistant, upon seeing a customer, is likely to ask: “Can I help you?” (the actual utterance may vary). This is a highly ritualized and institutionalized type of speech act, one that is transformed into a specific pragmeme by the context of the utterance, where “Can I help you?” means something completely different from “Can I help you?”, uttered by a passer-by who has stopped to assist someone who has suffered an accident. While, in the latter context, “Can I help you?” is clearly an offer to help (the nature of the assistance depending on the circumstances: “Do you want me to take you to hospital?”/“Would you like me to give you some water?”, etc.), in the former context, it is an offer of assistance based on the norm of interaction between customers and sales persons. The sales person offers her help as shop assistant: she is not going to offer the customer something to drink or have her call the police. As to the kind of help the shop assistant does provide, it should be connected with the goods she sells: she may provide advice, information, directions (“The fitting rooms are over there”). However, she cannot provide existential advice (“You look unhappy” or “Try to smile for a change”). She cannot even suggest to the customer what to choose, unless the customer specifically asks for such advice (“Can you help me make a choice?”).

The interesting thing about ritualized actions and their contextual interpretations is their standardized form; most of the time, even slight variations are not permitted. It is one deficiency of speech act theory to have failed to notice that ritualized actions take on ritual shapes, and that anything that departs from this ritual shape takes on a different significance. So, can a shop assistant offer help by saying “I would like to help you”, or should she say: “I am ready to assist you in your choices”, or even “I am ready to give you advice”? Even though speech act theory, in general, allows for literal speech acts to take on a different illocutionary force, depending on the context, this does not imply that one may freely use indirect speech acts in highly institutionalized activities such as the ones referred to above. One of the purposes of indirect speech acts is to protect the face of the coparticipant against likely damage (Brown and Levinson, 1978). In institutionalized discourse, however, that face is protected by the institution (Lakoff, 1989), hence indirect speech acts have little work to do here and might even appear inappropriate. I assume that in the context of a service encounter, an utterance such as “Is there any chance that you might accept my help?”, unless proffered in a humoristic fashion, is not only ridiculous, but plain offensive: it threatens the customer’s positive face, as she would certainly project herself as someone who accepts help if the need arises.

With regard to the possible replies to the utterance “Can I help you?”, given that this type of utterance represents a highly institutionalized form of talk, it is unlikely that such replies will orient to the illocutionary force ‘question’; on the contrary, they are expected to focus on the illocutionary force ‘offer of assistance’. For instance, a reply such as “Yes, please!” seems to orient to the character of the utterance as an offer of help rather than as a question. A negative reply will also orient to the utterance as an offer rather than as a question. In the latter case, a reply such as “No, thanks” could be interpreted as meaning “You cannot help me”; such a statement would at least be “interpretatively ambiguous”.⁴ However, in actual language use no such ambiguities are perceived, as the ritual which constrains the interpretation of the offer of help also determines the understanding of the reply. Of course, this is not to say that, despite the effects of the context, there can be no residual ambiguity left, especially if the utterance was intended by the speaker as ambivalent in the sense of Leech (1977: 99) and Thomas (1995: 195).⁵

One way in which one can answer questions of the type “Can I help you?” in the negative is by providing reasons for declining the offer. In the shop situation, a canonical negative reply is “I’m (or: I was) just looking around”. Now, it is interesting to note that while such replies are understood as a rejection of the offer, they may also be construed as reasons for acceptance. After all, a person who likes to look around may very well be pleased to have somebody show her around. The claim that “I was just looking around” represents an indirect speech act of rejection (when used as a premise in an argument about precisely such a speech act) can be easily refuted; it suffices to point out that, based on the same premise, one may construct a completely different argument, leading to a different conclusion. In other words, the institutional type of discourse seems to constrain the

⁴ As to this latter notion, see Jaszczolt (1999) on the distinction between the interpretation “You cannot help me because I will not allow you to”, and “You cannot help me because you are not in a position to do so [you do not have the knowledge or wherewithal]”.

⁵ Other scholars, such as Nerlich and Clarke (2000) use the term ‘ambiguation in context’.

interpretation of ‘canonical’ rejections such as “I was just looking around”. But is “I was just looking around” really a rejection? How about interpreting it as something in between “No, thanks” and “Yes, please”? After all, the assistant, upon hearing the reply, stays around, at a respectful distance from the customer, ready to help, and without trying to start a conversation; such a course of action will certainly not be perceived as impinging on the customer’s privacy.

3.4. “Are you being served?”

Alternatively, a shop assistant can offer her help by saying “Are you being served?”. This is a very interesting, albeit (on closer scrutiny) somewhat bizarre, expression. Presumably, the utterance is proffered to a customer potentially needing help. The typical situation is one in which the customer is not attended to by a shop assistant; in fact, it is unlikely that, if the customer is already being helped, further assistance will be offered. In a way, the expression is redundant, because the shop assistant who proffers it is aware that no one is helping the customer.

There is, of course, the possibility that the customer is being attended to by someone else who is temporarily absent, fetching things for the customer to see. Thus, theoretically, the utterance may be understood as checking whether some shop assistant is already helping the customer, even if this person is not immediately in view. Even so, the expression is normally short-circuited into the pragmeme “offer of help”, rather than into the pragmeme “checking whether something is the case”. A further, intriguing question is whether the utterance is at all interpretable literally in a situation such as customer/shop assistant interaction; in other words, is there a ‘normal’ path from an (assumed) literal interpretation to a pragmatic one (viz., the pragmeme “offer of help”)? Such a pragmatic reasoning may be at the basis of the inference; however, since the inference is not cancelable, there must be conventional elements present as well that contribute to the interpretation of the utterance as an offer of help. For example, the fact that in a shop situation, the utterance is more likely to be interpreted as an offer of help than it would be in a different context (say, in a home for the elderly) supports the idea of some conventional element(s) being involved in the ‘pragmemic’ interpretation.

3.5. *Praising vs. flattering*

Next, consider the distinction between the speech acts of ‘praising’ and ‘flattering’. While the words involved in these acts may be the same, their effects and contextual conditions are very different. Praising is unqualified and undergoes no pragmatic transformation. As Kurzon (1998: 28) has observed, the force of any utterance is in principle underdetermined, given that not only in general, the circumstances of utterance may turn the same string of words into a completely different speech act, but also, in particular, that any utterance may constitute a certain kind of speech act (e.g. ‘inciting’) if the circumstances are appropriate.

Praising implies some kind of evaluation of the recipient and is mostly uttered in the form of a declarative sentence (an assertion). An act of praising is an assertion with a positive evaluative content. X praises Y by proffering an assertion U, where U contains a

positive evaluation of Y's spiritual, moral, or physical qualities. What distinguishes praising from flattering is the ulterior purpose of this evaluation. In praising, this purpose is benign, especially in educational contexts, or at least (preempting here a possible objection by my readers) it ought to be: the praiser wants his words to have positive consequences for the recipient (specifically, he wants to enhance the recipient's self-esteem and/or encourage his or her correct behavior). As Scanlon (2003: 364) puts it, praising has as its primary function to tell people what they are like; secondarily (but importantly), its function is to encourage certain classes of action.

The Longman dictionary of the English language differentiates between the verbs 'to praise' and 'to flatter': 'to praise' is to express a favorable judgment, whilst 'to flatter' is "to praise excessively, esp. from motives of self-interest or to gratify another's vanity." The verbs thus seem to be differentiated both quantitatively and qualitatively.⁶ Thus, a teacher who praises a student has, as her ulterior aim, the wish to encourage him to study more. This ulterior purpose focuses on what is good for the recipient — it is an altruistic purpose. In contrast, a student providing a positive evaluation of his teacher is taking a risk. The utterance may be received as an act of praising whose ulterior purpose is altruistic: the student wants to reward the teacher as a person by praising her for what she is doing/has done. However, the utterance may also be taken as an act of flattering, whose ulterior egoistic purpose is the student's need to have himself rewarded by stimulating the teacher to treat him more generously. While praising always carries a risk, the recipient will be assisted by the context in determining whether the praise is to be taken as genuine or as an act of flattery. Suppose that the students are well prepared, such that the teacher objectively recognizes that on factual grounds, they all deserve high grades. Then, a positive evaluation of the teacher on the part of a student has to be taken as praise, not flattery, as it is unlikely that the student has an egoistic purpose when uttering the praise; probably, he only wants to consolidate the good relationship with the teacher. But suppose now that the context is one in which the students are not doing too well; neither is the teacher deserving of much praise. Then the teacher knows that she does not merit an overly positive evaluation; she also realizes that the student, in giving praise, may have an egoistic purpose by proffering an explicitly positive evaluation of her teaching. In the teacher's eyes, such an action would automatically qualify as adulation.

⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the subtle distinction between praising and flattering. Actually, that referee felt that in praising, the speaker's purpose is not necessarily benign. Consider the following counterexample to my analysis: "A malevolent teacher wants to ruin a student by systematically correcting his correct replies and praising him for the wrong answers". Surely, the purpose this teacher has in mind is not benign (his praising is part of a larger plan of destroying that student); the teacher has done something he should not have done, that is, he has expressed a favorable judgment where no praise was due. In other words, this teacher has praised the student erroneously. Why do we say this? Presumably because the act of 'praising' involves a sincerity condition, to the effect that the person who praises must sincerely want to enhance the recipient's self-esteem, as a consequence of the praiser having noticed a positive quality in the recipient. This sincerity condition ensures that, in practice, praising ought to be benign, as it will tend to reinforce positive and not negative qualities; one will refrain from praising when the quality connected with the act in question is questionable or even negative. The referee is of course right in remarking that the praiser may not always abide by the sincerity condition, in which case his purpose in praising may not necessarily be benign; but I still think that in principle, it ought to be.

3.6. “You should tell your son that he has got to get along well with everybody”

Consider the following situation. Alessandro and Francesca are friends and teachers in the same school. Francesca’s son Giuseppe is in one of Alessandro’s classes. Alessandro and Francesca are friends with Maria Pina, who also has a son, Stefano, in Alessandro’s class. Maria Pina tells Alessandro that Giuseppe and Stefano recently had a quarrel at a pizza restaurant. According to Maria Pina, Giuseppe wanted to go home sooner than his friends and this had caused an argument. Furthermore, Maria Pina said that Giuseppe threatened Stefano by telling him *Poi ci vediamo a scuola* (lit. “Then we shall see each other at school”). Stefano, Maria Pina, and Alessandro all interpreted this utterance as a threat on Giuseppe’s part not to help Stefano any longer with his class assignments and written tests. At this point, Alessandro who, as a teacher, held both students in high esteem, said to Francesca: “You should tell your son that he has to get along well with everybody”. Presumably, Alessandro wanted to tell Francesca that her son had to adapt himself to his friends’ ways, or, at least, avoid having arguments with them. Taking into account the context in which the interaction occurred, I now want to show how the same utterance type actually may receive a very different interpretation than the one intended.

Here is the context. Despite the fact that they are friends, Giuseppe and Stefano’s life styles are very different, Giuseppe’s mother is a very scrupulous and attentive person, who prevents Giuseppe from doing a number of things that boys of his age normally do (such as riding motorbikes) and is particularly proud of the fact that her (only) son studies hard. Stefano, on the other hand, does not generally like to exert himself (although he puts a lot of energy into Alessandro’s subject). As an educator, Alessandro recognizes that Giuseppe’s life style is so far removed from all the other boys’ that it may cause him problems (such as being left out). Alessandro is also aware that both Francesca and her son are in possession of very good qualities — yet, those qualities, by the standards of the times, are old-fashioned, such that Giuseppe runs the risk of becoming more and more isolated.

In this context, Alessandro suggested to Giuseppe’s mother to tell him “to get along well with everybody”. Naturally, this utterance was not intended to mean that Giuseppe had to get along well with every person in the world (nor even in his town). It merely meant that Giuseppe has to get along well with the boys of his own age and of his own milieu (presumably those in the same class or attending the same school). Of course, Alessandro’s utterance could be taken negatively, as implying that Giuseppe was the kind of person who did not get along well with the other boys in his surroundings. Still, the teacher only meant to say that Giuseppe had to make an effort to adapt himself to young people with a different mentality; he was neutral as to whether Giuseppe’s or the other boys’ life style was more correct.

However, the utterance *was* interpreted negatively. In actual fact, Alessandro was not even aware of the ambiguity of his utterance whereby, on one presupposition reading, Giuseppe was responsible for the quarrel, while, on another reading, it was Stefano who was responsible. On yet another reading, the teacher was neutral as to who was to blame. It may be hard to understand why the pejorative, rather than the positive (not to mention the neutral) reading of the utterance was chosen by Francesca, considering the fact that Alessandro had given very high marks both to Giuseppe and Stefano and thus had provided

ample proof of neutrality. The misunderstanding was made possible due to a gap in mutual knowledge. Francesca never realized that she was an old-fashioned mother and that, even though her intentions were laudable, this could cause problems for Giuseppe. Her response showed that she took Alessandro's advice not as an educational, but as a judgmental act. Alessandro's intention was to teach Giuseppe to get along well with people, even with them he did not like; however, Francesca interpreted this as a negative judgment on Alessandro's part regarding her son, a judgment implying that Giuseppe was the kind of person who usually got into arguments with people.

3.7. *An interpretative ambiguity: "M. has never flattered me"*

Another interesting classroom episode occurred in the school. A teacher had said in class that, despite the fact that a certain student never had tried to flatter him (and, in fact, barely greeted him in the corridors), this person (named M.) was an excellent student who also cared for his school mates. By this favorable judgment, the teacher clearly wanted to emphasize both the human qualities of the student and his school progress. The communication was a failure, as the other students attributed a comparative dimension to it, and took it as expressing an unfavorable judgment on themselves. In particular, another student, E., was negatively struck by the teacher's utterance — possibly because he was M.'s closest friend and did not like to be compared to him. E. considered the utterance to represent a (negative) judgment on his own behavior, as he had previously praised the teacher on (at least) some occasions, by comparing him to a previous teacher of English (saying that 'now the class had a serious teacher') and, on another occasion, by congratulating him on the black suit he wore. The teacher, by saying that he appreciated the fact that M. had never flattered him, never had had any intention of expressing a comparative judgment; in fact, all he had intended to do was to find an explanation for a somewhat unexpected behavior — the fact that M. was not in the habit of greeting him in the corridors and seemed to avoid having a conversation with him. The teacher was, to some extent, justifying his own conduct; he never had any intention of offending those students who were in the habit of praising him. So the teacher was surprised to receive a letter from E. in which, in addition to a number of general remarks, it was stated that "he [E.] would have said that Mr. X was an excellent teacher of English, if it were not for the fact that X did not like to be flattered".

The teacher never really understood that there had been a misunderstanding between himself and the class until quite late in the school year. When he did discover what had happened, he publicly announced to the class that there had been this misunderstanding between himself and the class, but that he had never really intended to blame anybody for flattering him, since he was certain no one had ever tried to. He added that there was a considerable difference between flattering and praising, as the former implied an element of deceit (visible as exaggeration) and was accompanied by a hidden purpose, whereas praising was certainly an allowable action that involved no more than the voicing of one's opinion — and he was sure that when they had given him praise, they had merely voiced their sincere beliefs.

It is interesting to notice how the students had turned the teacher's utterance "M. has never flattered me" into a pragmeme by contextualizing it in the light of their previous

interaction and assigning it a comparative value, with the collateral consequence of the utterance being understood/construed as an act of ‘blaming’. This interpretation must have proceeded as follows. The utterance “M. never flattered me”, containing a negative element, was seen as presupposing that “Someone flattered me”. As to the difference between flattering and praising, however, the students never gave it much thought; they probably felt that the context of the class and the asymmetry of status between teacher and students *ipso facto* qualified praising as flattering. Presumably, some conventionally accepted mechanism transforms a praise into flattery, given certain conditions; here, the fact that students (think they) may obtain advantages from teachers they praise may be seen as a contextual element contributing to that transformation. Despite this, other contextual elements militated against such a transformation and the establishment of the pragmeme ‘flattering’, such as the fact that the students had been sincere in their praise, and that, in his heart, the teacher was aware of this, especially when he saw how deeply the students had resented his official rejection of the so-called ‘flattering’. Thus, the pragmeme ‘rejection of praise’, combined with the breakdown in their interaction, made it possible for the teacher to establish that when they did praise him, they were not flattering, but meant it sincerely. The fact that the interaction improved after the teacher remedied the problem, and that the students felt relieved, showed how the students initially had used the teacher’s supposedly comparative judgment to infer that the teacher resented their praise. The interaction in question is thus an instance of what Thomas (1995: 183) has called ‘meaning negotiation’, viz., the establishment of a common communicative intention on the basis of a communicative process.

4. Conclusion

This paper has provided a provisional definition of the pragmeme within a socially-oriented framework for the investigation of language use. The shift proposed by this paper takes us from a philosophically-oriented perspective on speech act theory toward a societally-oriented perspective that emphasizes the situation of utterance and the conventions governing language use — conventions that are responsible for enriching utterance interpretation, and for mapping the literal speech act associated with the production of a given sentence-type onto a fully interpreted speech act. The mappings considered here involve knowledge of the semantic rules of the language, awareness of the pragmatic procedures determining fully articulated explicatures, and insight into the social conventions that associate an utterance and a context of use with a certain, final interpretation — that for which we have used the term *pragmeme*. The approach advocated in this paper is not at odds with a more classical view of semantics; in fact, it presupposes it. It has never been denied that words have meanings which are context-invariant, and that sentential meaning is obtained by combining the meanings associated with the lexemes by using syntactic information (sometimes called ‘semantic glue’). What the paper certainly has advocated is a shift from a view of language in which abstract semantics has paramount importance, to a view of language in which the interpretation of an utterance is embedded in a situation of use, in which speakers play crucial roles, and where conventions of use (that are closely tied to the situation of utterance) play an important role in creating further

levels of meaning accruing to the utterance, over and above the levels contributed by semantics. As *Duranti (2001a,b: 1)* says, “If we want to understand the role of languages in people’s lives, we must go beyond the study of their grammar and venture into the world of social action, where words are embedded in and are constitutive of specific cultural activities such as telling a story, asking for a favor, greeting, showing respect, praying, giving directions, reading, insulting, praising, arguing in court, making a toast, or explaining a political agenda”.

There is no doubt that further research in this area is needed and that the notion of the *pragmeme* has to be refined further, by analyzing other, stimulating examples of language use; it is hoped that the present paper will contribute to putting research in linguistics on a proper footing, by having provided an array of analytical considerations on language use. The paper’s concern with activity types that seem to impose certain interpretative rules determining the meaning of utterances is very much in line with the Hymesian paradigm of studying speech events and with that paradigm’s rules for interpreting the utterances occurring in such events; the paradigm can be considered a consensualist approach in that it does not analyze culture critically.

The question may be raised how the notion of ‘*pragmeme*’ fares in the light of a post-Hymesian paradigm that stresses both appropriateness and creativeness in context, so as to account for the irreducibly contingent, unique character of events and the historic change in the socio-cultural norms of appropriateness (*Duranti, 2003*). Inasmuch as *pragmemes* are essentially speech acts in context, they contribute to the unique events in which speakers attempt to construct the self and change the institutions; by exploiting the context of utterance, speakers can impose individual traits on their utterances, using language creatively to project a unique image of themselves.

A further claim has been that utterances do not merely exploit, but modify contexts. This view (originally due to *Levinson, 1983*) has important implications, as it moves away from a consensualist approach in the direction of a post-Hymesian approach in which language serves to construct the self and to change the political and social institutions (including the very norms of appropriateness).

Acknowledgement

I am greatly indebted to Jacob L. Mey for his very useful suggestions. His ideas on *pragmemes* have inspired this paper.

References

- Atkinson, Max A., Cuff, E.C., Lee, J.R., 1978. In: Schenkein, J. (Ed.), *The Recommencement of a Meeting as a Members’ Accomplishment*. pp. 133–153.
- Bauman, Richard, Sherzer, Joel (Eds.), 1974. *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bilmes, Jack, 1986. *Discourse and Behavior*. Plenum, New York and London.
- Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen C., 1978. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Caffi, Claudia, 2002. *La mitigazione*. LIT Verlag, Münster.
- Capone, Alessandro, 2001. *Modal Adverbs and Discourse*. ETS, Pisa.
- Capone, Alessandro, 2004a. “I saw you” (towards a theory of the pragmeme). *RASK: International Journal of Language and Communication* 20, 28–38.
- Capone, Alessandro, 2004b. Review of Jacob L. Mey, *Pragmatics. An introduction*. *Linguistics* 1170–1173.
- Capone, Alessandro, 2004c. Review of Caffi, *La mitigazione*. *Language* 80 (4), 879–880.
- Carston, Robyn, 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Dummett, Michael (Ed.), 2003a. *Language and communication. The Seas of Language*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 166–187.
- Dummett, Michael (Ed.), 2003b. *Mood, force and convention. The Seas of Language*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 202–223.
- Duranti, Alessandro, 1992. *Etnografia del parlare quotidiano*. Carocci, Roma.
- Duranti, Alessandro (Ed.), 2001. *Linguistic anthropology: history, ideas, and issues*. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 1–38.
- Duranti, Alessandro (Ed.), 2001. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Duranti, Alessandro, 2003. Language as culture in US anthropology. Three paradigms. *Current Anthropology* 44 (3), 1–25.
- Gazdar, Gerald, 1979. *Pragmatics*. Academic Press, New York.
- Geis, Michael L., 1995. *Speech Acts and Conversational Interaction*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Goffman, Erving, 1976. Replies and responses. *Language in Society* 5, 257–313.
- Goffman, Erving, 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Gross, Steven, 2001. *Essays on Context-Sensitivity and its Philosophical Significance*. Routledge, London.
- Gumperz, John, 1977. Sociocultural knowledge in conversational inference. In: Saviile-Troike, M. (Ed.), *Linguistics and Anthropology*. Georgetown University Press, Washington, pp. 191–211.
- Hymes, Dell, 1962. The ethnography of speaking. In: Gladwin, T., Sturtevant, W.C. (Eds.), *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Anthropological Society of Washington, pp. 13–53.
- Jaszczolt, Katarzyna, 1999. *Discourse, Beliefs and Intentions*. Elsevier, Oxford.
- Kurzton, Dennis, 1998. The speech act of incitement: perlocutionary acts revisited. *Journal of Pragmatics* 29 (5), 571–596.
- Lakoff, Robin, 1989. The limits of politeness: therapeutic and courtroom discourse. *Multilingua* 8, 101–129.
- Leech, Geoffrey, 1977. *Language and Tact*. Linguistic Agency, University of Trier.
- Levinson, Stephen C., 1979. Activity types and language. *Linguistics* 17, 365–399.
- Levinson, Stephen C., 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Levinson, Stephen C., 2000. *Presumptive Meanings*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Mey, Jacob L., 2001. *Pragmatics*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Nerlich, Brigitte, Clarke, David, 2000. Ambiguities we live by. Towards a pragmatics of polysemy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2), 125–150.
- Scanlon, T.M., 2003. The significance of choice. In: Watson, G. (Ed.), *Free Will*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 352–371.
- Stalnaker, Robert, 2002. Common ground. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 25, 701–721.
- Thomas, Jenny, 1995. *Meaning in Interaction*. Longman, London.
- Verschueren, Jef, 1987. Pragmatics as a theory of linguistic adaptation. In: Working document Nr. 1, International Pragmatics Association, Antwerp.
- Verschueren, Jef, 1999. *Understanding Pragmatics*. Arnold, New York.
- Weinrich, Harald, 1966. Per una linguistica della menzogna. *Lingua e Stile* 1 (1), 7–22.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell, Oxford.

Dr. Alessandro Capone studied with James Higginbotham and Yan Huang at the University of Oxford, where he obtained an MPhil and a DPhil, in linguistics. He was research fellow in linguistics and temporary lecturer in applied linguistics at the University of Messina. He has published three books entitled: “Dilemmas and excogitations: an essay on modality, clitics and discourse” (Messina, Armando Siciliano), “Modal adverbs and discourse” (Pisa, ETS), and “Tra semantica e pragmatica” (Bologna, Clueb).