

ON PRAGMATIC UNIVERSALS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing disputes on the scope of pragmatics have posed further questions concerning the possibility of devising a set of pragmatic universals. In other words, and this is the main question to be asked in the present paper, if pragmatics is supposed to gain the status of a legitimate level of linguistic investigation, will it be possible to single out those phenomena that are not only of interest to pragmatists, but are also common to all natural languages, i.e. they deserve the status of pragmatic universals. The issue becomes even more challenging in the light of the fact that not only has the 'pragmatic wastebasket' been loaded with problems which truth-conditional semantics cannot account for, but, as a result, it has lacked its own metalanguage, hence, a basic unit of analysis, cf. Verschueren (1987: 37). The attempts to overcome this obstacle have led to the conclusion that out of the few notions considered for the label of pragmatic universal, only deixis seems to be unquestionable, cf., for instance, Bar-Hillel (1970: 76), Comrie (1981: 26), Verschueren (1987: 27).

As can be expected, serious controversies arise in connection with the remaining potential candidates. Thus, implicature deserves this status according to, e.g. Levinson (1983: 97ff), whereas Ervin-Tripp (1987: 55) claims that in view of the most recent studies "what appears to be understanding through the use of implicature may often be due to practical reasoning". Finally, for Verschueren (1987: 57) Inferencing is just one of numerous lists of topics related to the medium of adaptation, the latter notion being crucial for his view of pragmatics to be elaborated below.¹

Presupposition is another debatable issue, which can hardly be surprising in view of the abundance of relevant literature and the lack of common consent on the topic. Thus, Levinson (1983: 216) is inclined to include the notion among

¹ Verschueren's approach to implicature stems from his notion of pragmatics as a perspective on language. Hence, Inferencing can be included among other, what he calls 'discourse universals', which along with the traditional phonological, syntactic and semantic universals would be placed at various levels of adaptation, cf. Verschueren (1987: 100).

the potential pragmatic universals, since he claims that "Even in languages of quite different families, the linguistic items that give rise to presuppositions seem to be precisely parallel" (*ibid.*). For Verschueren (1987: 108) not only presupposition but also implicature and pragmatic inference belong to Implicit Information inherent to the pragmatic perspective he postulates.²

The last candidate for the label of pragmatic universal to be considered here is the notion of speech act. Even though the idea seems tempting, linguists have been reluctant to grant universal status to speech acts, mainly due to the lack of any uniform methodological framework capable of capturing their properties. For instance, Levinson (1983: 226) admits that speech acts remain, along with presupposition and implicature, one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for, but he simultaneously expresses doubt as to their universality. In his discussion of conversational structure Levinson (1983: 369) concludes that at present we simply do not know to what extent conversational organization is to be considered universal. His conjecture is that while certain local management systems such as turn-taking, adjacency pair organization or repair systems have a universal basis, the overall structural units — like the notion of conversation — are more likely to be culturally variable. An analogous observation is due to Leech, whose analysis of speech acts has led him to the conclusion that (1983: 171–2) conditions such as Searle's (1969) essential, preparatory, and sincerity conditions of illocutions do not have to be independently stated, since comparable (though probabilistic) conditions can be arrived at by virtue of the sense of the utterance and the maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle. Having rejected attempts to form rigid taxonomies of illocutionary acts, Leech is for a taxonomy of illocutionary verbs (predicates). But this obviously renders any universal claims futile, since, as he puts it in conclusion (1983: 226): "it is clear that performatives are a totally special case which can in no way be regarded as the canonical form of speech activity". Finally, in her study of child interaction Ervin-Tripp (1987: 60) also gives a negative answer to the question concerning the universality of speech acts. According to her observations, all the categories considered by children to be indirect requests, though they might be categories in recall, do not correspond to natural categories in production.

2. PRAGMATIC UNIVERSALS AND THE NOTION OF ADAPTABILITY

It follows from our discussion so far that the attempt to come up even with a small number of pragmatic universals faces grim prospects. Does it mean,

² Cf. Östamn's (1986) definition of pragmatics as the theory of implicitness, where he views implicitness as the basic property of language investigated by pragmatics.

as I have already shown elsewhere (Kryk 1988a), that the only reasonable candidate for pragmatic universal would be deixis? Fortunately, the answer to this question seems to be negative, provided that the problem is analysed within a pragmatic framework advocated recently by Verschueren. If we take it after the author (1987: 37) that pragmatics is a perspective on language rather than a traditionally understood component of linguistic theory with its own clearly definable object of investigation, we face, as he points out, another problem, i.e. defining this perspective. Verschueren suggests that it is the notion of adaptability (in conjunction with negotiability and variability)³ that would be the key to the understanding of language in use. The present analysis will concentrate on the former notion, i.e. adaptability, which, according to Verschueren (1987: 41), boils down to viewing language as "one of a range of adaptive phenomena in the interaction between humans and their 'conditions of life'". This empiricist approach to language clashes with Chomsky's rationalism and his views on language universals. In this sense, adaptability and universality are incompatible opposites; however, as Verschueren (*op. cit.* 42) rightly points out, the notion of pragmatic universals is not self-contradictory. In order to justify this contention he distinguishes between maximal and minimal universality. The former is too strong for our purposes, since it is the researcher's own experience that is treated as maximally representative of the corresponding universal experience. Hence Verschueren claims (*ibid.*) that it is the assumption of minimal universality that is safer as a starting point to approach a new language or culture. Here he reaches the heart of the matter addressing himself to the notion of pragmatic universals. The universals in question, no matter whether he calls them pragmatic or universals of adaptability, require the assumption of minimal universality, along with a pragmatic theory of some kind, indispensable as a descriptive and heuristic tool.

Having adopted the general assumptions of the new framework, i.e. the perspective view of pragmatics, it would be worth considering how the four above-mentioned candidates for the label of pragmatic universals can be incorporated into the present model. My contention is that the confusion about potential pragmatic universals has stemmed from the dual nature of the notions in question which, like the notion of linguistic sign, can be divided into two constituent parts: one of them legitimately linguistic, hence belonging to code, the other one extra-linguistic, pertaining to language user and the widely-understood (i.e. psychological, socio-cultural, etc.) context. Consequently, the remaining part of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of the relevant concepts (i.e. deixis, presupposition, implicature, and speech acts), which would shed some light on the issue of pragmatic universals. The hypothesis put forth here would offer an explanation to the problem by assigning a uni-

³ For the definitions of negotiability and variability, cf. Verschueren (1987: 33–4).

versal value to the code-oriented aspects of the notions considered, while the speaker-and-context-oriented aspects will be left to the notion of pragmatic perspective.

3. THE ANALYSIS

3.1. Deixis

The search for pragmatic universals will start from the most obvious candidate for this label, i.e. deixis. For Verschueren (1987: 87), deixis is listed under the level of adaptation called *propositional content*, where under reference types he lists deixis, along with coreference, demonstrative reference, etc. Curiously enough, his list of types of deixis enumerates the 3 basic deictic categories of person, place, and time, on a par with what I have called (Kryk 1987) 'marginal deictic' uses. However, my approach will, hopefully, find full justification in the present analysis.

Consider the following classical example:

(1) I am here now

which has the reading of:

(1a) Barbara Kryk is in Antwerp on December 9, 1988.

It is not only uncontroversial but even trivial to observe that our example employs the three traditional deictic categories of person, place and time deixis, traceable to Bühler's (1934) analysis of an utterance situation in terms of the speaker's spatio-temporal location, the *Origo*. Moreover, it is also in this sense that Bar-Hillel (1970: 76) referred to the indexical character of all natural languages, whose speakers use indexical expressions in over 90% of the sentences they produce. Indeed, there has been a common consent among linguists and philosophers that the 3 above-mentioned deictic uses are shared by all languages, thus constituting a common core of indexicality, conceived of as a universal notion. Consequently, my conjecture is that the 3 kinds of deixis belong to code, in the sense that they are grammaticalized in language structure by means of discrete categories (pronouns, adverbials of place and time respectively). This is where they are markedly different from the remaining deictic uses.

For reasons of brevity, only three 'marginal' uses will be considered here, i.e. discourse, social, and emotional deixis, cf. (2), (3), (4), respectively:

(2) Mary said that she couldn't come to the party, and I didn't like *that*.

(3) Doctor: How is *our* leg today?

(4) And *this* cowboy orders *this* whisky and gives it to *this* woman...

What the three examples have in common is that, unlike in case of person, place, and time deixis, which are determined by external objective conditions of the utterance situation, here the use of a particular deictic is entirely up to the speaker. Thus in (2), an example of discourse deixis, it is the speaker who decides that in order to make the utterance more succinct, he will pronominalize the subordinate sentence by means of a deictic.⁴

The speaker's subjective choice can be witnessed much more clearly in case of social deixis, cf. example (3), where it is the doctor who, taking into account a particular assignment of social roles, uses a plural pronoun to identify himself with the patient. The situation reaches an extreme in case of empathetic deixis. When the speaker is personally involved with the entity talked about or is self-identifying with the attitude or viewpoint of the addressee, he or she tends to use the proximal *this/here/now*, rather than their distal counterparts, cf. Lyons (1977: 677). Thus, pointing out a tooth to a dentist, people say either (5) or (6), from their own or the dentist's point of view respectively, cf. Fillmore (1975: 84):

(5) It's *this* one.

(6) It's *that* one.

Moreover, social roles are determined by the social status of the interlocutors, hence resulting in the adequate distribution of conventionalized forms of address such as these below:

(7) Yes Sir/Doctor/Professor/Your Excellency.

Needless to say, forms of address are idiosyncratic in a given language, although the so-called *vous/tu* distinction is present in many Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages.

Like the two deictic uses discussed above, emotional deixis is also highly dependent on the speaker's choices. Thus he or she employs demonstrative pronouns (both proximal and distal, but never mixing these two categories, cf. Kryk (1987: 95)), for emphatic purposes only, cf. (4).

Summing up, it has been demonstrated so far that the three classical deictic uses, i.e. person, place, and time deixis, belong to code, since not only do they receive an unambiguous and uniform grammatical rendition, but also their transiency is due to 'objective' factors of utterance situation. Conversely, discourse, social, and emotional deixis are due to the speaker's choices governed by subjective psychological and sociological factors, which are highly language-specific. Consequently, since person/place/time deixis are present in all languages; they can be ascribed the status of language universals, while the sociological,

⁴ The obvious parallel between discourse deixis and anaphora will be disregarded here as it is beyond the scope of the present analysis. See, however, Ehlich (1982); Kryk (1987: 67ff).

psychological and emotive factors would belong to the pragmatic perspective on language, which can affect different language levels, e.g. both social and emotional deixis can be signalled by intonation, cf. Marek (1987). This dual approach to pragmatic notions, if it turns out applicable to the other candidates for the label of pragmatic universal, would constitute a strong argument in favor of Verschueren's view of pragmatics as it would bring about a reconciliation between the perspective approach, where the language-specific phenomena would belong, and the universalist approach, accommodating the properties shared by all languages.

3.2. Presupposition

As can easily be predicted, presupposition, whose status has always been shaky, is also susceptible to the dichotomous approach advocated here. Among the kinds of presupposition distinguished in the abundant literature,⁵ two main uses can be separated as influential, i.e. the relation between sentences (or lexical items), which corresponds to the opposition of presupposition and entailment, vs. speaker's presupposition, based on his/her beliefs. In the former case, presupposition is understood as a logical relation, abstracted from the language user, e.g.

- (8) I regret that Antwerp is far from Poznań \supset
Antwerp is far from Poznań.
(9) Mary is a spinster \supset
Mary is a woman.

Note that both in (8), an instance of presupposition holding between sentences, and in (9), an instance of lexical presupposition, the presupposed entity is true, regardless of the speaker's attitudes or beliefs. Conversely, the so-called speaker's presupposition does not follow from any logical premises and/or the properties of language as such, but is entirely due to a subjective speaker's belief (for the purposes of successful communication — to be shared with his/her interlocutor, as in the classical example):

- (10) John called Mary a lexicalist, and then SHE insulted HIM— To call someone a lexicalist is an insult.

As follows from our examples, the notion of presupposition seems to fit the dual schema advocated here. On the one hand, logical presupposition, which is shared by all natural languages, can be captured by appropriate truth tables, and thus belongs to the stock of pragmatic universals. On the

⁵ Cf., for instance, Kempson's (1975: 54) extensive discussion on various uses of presupposition by linguists.

other hand, the speaker's presupposition, highly idiosyncratic by definition, would be ascribed to the pragmatic perspective, stretching over different levels of linguistic analysis. One can easily imagine how speaker's beliefs could affect various linguistic choices: suprasegmentals, as in (10); lexicon, e.g. by the choice of four-letter words to express one's anger, or syntax, e.g. being brief, in order to signal our unwillingness to convey too much information. This is where presupposition relates to implicature, as has been indicated by Karttunen and Peters (1975; 1979), cf. below. Consequently, it is implicature that our discussion will now turn to.

3.3. Implicature

The idea of implicature, put forth by Grice (1975), should lend itself easily to the schema advocated here, since it rests upon the distinction between conventional vs. conversational implicature. The former term comprises non-truth-conditional inferences that are not derived from the maxims, but are simply attached by convention to particular lexical items or expressions. As Levinson (1983: 127) points out, Grice provides just two examples: *but*, which has the same truth-conditional content as *and*, with an additional conventional implicature that there is some contrast between the conjuncts, and *therefore*, which contributes nothing to the truth conditions of the expressions it occurs within, cf. Grice (1975: 44). Other examples suggested elsewhere are *even*, cf. Kempson (1975: 200ff), and *yet*, cf. Wilson (1975: 140).

It follows from the nature of conventional implicature that it is both non-cancellable and detachable, hence it could qualify as a pragmatic universal⁶, unlike conversational implicature, which is entirely context-dependent, i.e. non-conventional, hence it would be cancellable and non-detachable. These characteristics of conversational implicature have often been sources of jokes, like:

- (11) A: Sally, you look like a deer...
B: Because my legs are so long?
A: No, because they are so hairy.

While the flouting of Maxim of Quality can give rise to jokes (as well as metaphors and irony), Levinson (1983: 110ff) rightly observes that the flouting of other maxims leads to equally desirable results, i.e. tautologies, avoidance techniques, and irony, in case of the Maxims of Quantity, Relevance, and Manner, respectively.

⁶ I do not agree with Levinson (1983: 129) who claims that many discourse deictics (e.g. *however*, *anyway*, *moreover*, etc), as well as social-deictic terms (e.g. *Sir*, *Madam*, *Your Honor*) would also belong to conventional implicatures.

Consequently, the dual characteristics of implicature seem to corroborate the present hypothesis to the effect that only conventional implicature deserves the status of a pragmatic universal, due to its conventionality, detachability, and non-cancellability. In contrast, conversational implicature, as an ambiguous notion resting upon the speaker's beliefs (hence cancellable and non-detachable) belongs to the widely-understood pragmatic perspective on language. Two additional arguments in favor of this division are in order here. Firstly, some attempts have been made to capture presuppositions in terms of conventional implicatures, cf. Karttunen and Peters (1975; 1979)⁷. Secondly, one can easily multiply examples with conversational implicatures arising in connection with the flouting of the Maxims on all levels of linguistic analysis, e.g. a sentence like:

(12) I am John Smith; nice to meet you.

uttered with a lisp and with a peculiar intonation, would implicate our critical attitude towards John Smith's pronunciation and intonation idiosyncracies (by way of violating the Maxim of Quality on the articulatory and suprasegmental level). Also, an abundance of difficult lexical items could implicate (by way of exploiting the Maxim of Quantity) our superior attitude towards an uneducated (or, at least slightly ignorant in our field) interlocutor, e.g.

(13) The transiency of indexicals has been indiscriminately ascribed to their idiosyncratic properties vis-a-vis other lexical categories.

Finally, numerous examples can be construed to illustrate the unnecessary prolixity or irrelevance expressed by syntactic means, e.g.

(14) A: How old are you, Barbara?

B: If I were you, I would have probably given this question some thought before asking it.

This section might thus be concluded with the encouraging contention that our split-pragmatics hypothesis has been corroborated by three notions so far, i.e. deixis, presupposition, and implicature. The last candidate to be considered here for the label of pragmatic universal is the notion of speech act, and this is what the present discussion will now turn to.

3.4. Speech acts

The confusion arising in connection with speech acts has already been mentioned above, hence they can be suspected of being less susceptible to any analysis aiming at significant generalizations. Indeed, in my previous brief account of

⁷ For a criticism of Karttunen and Peters' theory, cf. Levinson (1983: 207ff).

the topic, cf. Kryk (1988b), speech acts were the only notion to be ruled out of the set of possible pragmatic universals. Therefore, to avoid any hasty conclusions biased by the previous results, speech acts would deserve special attention here. However, a closer look at the relevant theories available at the moment shows that our attempts are doomed to failure. Whether we take Austin's (1962) theory of performatives, or Searle's (1969) division of speech acts into five, more or less clear-cut, types, we still face many problems. The obfuscation of Austin's theory was due to his introduction of the notions of explicit vs. implicit performatives, while Searle's theory, even though it was an improvement on Austin's proposal, still lacked a principled basis. Indeed, in order to classify all the functions that language can play, one would face a laborious task. Moreover, as the number of possible illocutions is finite in kind, and differs from language to language due to some cultural factors, perlocutions are obviously endless. Therefore, I would be inclined to take Levinson's (1983: 276) position as regards this issue, i.e. ascribe the status of pragmatic universals to the three unquestionably universal sentence types, i.e. declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives. These would belong to our universal core, while the remaining illocutions, i.e. requests, apologies, complaints, warnings, and what have you, can safely be left to the pragmatic perspective. Again, my proposal is consonant with Verschueren's view including speech acts (divided into Searle's five categories) among possible levels of adaptation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, the hypothesis of split pragmatics put forth at the beginning of the present analysis seems to be a possible way of approaching pragmatic concepts. If we assume, as has been done above, that so-called pragmatic notions always stem from some core concepts, universally present in all languages, then their language-specific renditions, as well as socio-culturally and psychologically motivated uses could be analysed in terms of a pragmatic perspective conceived of as a superstructure affecting all levels of language analysis.

The present study, sketchy for reasons of brevity, has only touched upon the complex problem of pragmatic universals. However, if it has stirred some new thoughts that might lead to further investigations in the field, then it has served its purpose.

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