Preface

This book presents an introduction to pragmatics, that is, the study of how speakers can mean more than they say and how listeners can understand them.

A: where’s the IHT?
B: well, Dave’s been around . . .

A wants to find the International Herald Tribune, which is not in its usual place in the teachers’ lounge. B answers by commenting that a fellow teacher, Dave, has been seen in the school. B does not say, “Oh, maybe Dave has it, because he reads it every morning.” Pragmatics is interested in explaining the reasons for B’s indirect response and how A is able to construe it as appropriate. The conversation ends with A’s stating:

A: oh, he is, is he! I bet it’s in his office [exits into the hallway]

Pragmatics is a relatively new area of linguistics; it became a recognized field with the publication in 1983 of two seminal books, Leech’s Principles of Pragmatics and Levinson’s Pragmatics. Despite their important contributions, neither meets the needs of students or second language teachers who do not have a considerable background in linguistics.

This book is designed to meet those needs. It assumes only a rudimentary knowledge of linguistics (and motivation to learn more!). It may be used in introductory courses on pragmatics at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels, for students who are preparing to teach languages as well as for those with teaching experience who want to update their knowledge in an area of linguistics important for second language
educators. As a result of the expanding interest in the cognitive and social dimensions of language use beyond single sentences, students majoring in linguistics, whether formal-theoretical or applied, cannot ignore pragmatics. This book is dedicated to helping them, starting from the basics and working toward a solid overview of the field. Students in related fields, such as communication and bilingual education, will find knowledge of pragmatics very helpful for their future careers.

For language educators, a solid knowledge of pragmatics is crucial in developing successful second and foreign language speakers and writers. As long as language education consisted mainly of learning the phonology, syntax, and vocabulary of the second or foreign language, \(^1\) demands on the teachers were relatively limited and those on the learners potentially attainable. However, with the advent of more modern approaches, which reflect research in second language acquisition, classroom practitioners need to expand their knowledge about language and linguistics as well as their competencies as facilitators, in particular with the communicative language teaching approach. They now have to teach how to speak the second language (L2) and to train learners to use it in situationally appropriate ways.

Numerous studies in second language acquisition (SLA) proclaim that languages can only be learned in interactions where meaning is negotiated with native and nonnative speakers. Learners require opportunities to ask questions in the second or foreign language, seek clarification or confirmation of their understanding, and sort out misunderstandings. In effect, learners learn the second or foreign language by interacting with it. Since such activities entail knowing more than the correct pronunciation, grammar, and lexis of the L2, the model of language competence has to include more than linguistic knowledge. It is part of what has been labeled communicative competence. One such model is shown in the accompanying diagram. Knowing a language includes organizational and pragmatic competence, comprising both illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. In other words, pragmatic ability means being able to use language to carry out everyday functions in culturally appropriate ways.

Clearly, an understanding of pragmatics will benefit teachers, particularly those teaching a language that is not their mother tongue or working with learners outside the target language community. Such
circumstances stretch teachers’ roles in developing the pragmatic competence of learners. In second language contexts, with an acquisition-rich environment outside the classroom, teachers and learners can anticipate exposure that supports classroom activities. The foreign language environment explicitly raises the need for a comprehensive understanding of pragmatics and its importance in developing language proficiency. By considering the perspective of both ESL and EFL educators, this book will help them to

Integrate the teaching of pragmatic competence in language programs and materials
Understand the problems learners have with comprehension of messages requiring cognitive processing beyond that of the spoken or written word
Provide insights into comprehension and production of pragmatic meaning
Evaluate textbooks and other teaching materials as well as assessment procedures for language proficiency
Assess the value of communicative language teaching practices
Help learners develop strategies to handle misunderstandings and other communication problems
Enhance awareness of spoken and written text in the mother tongue and second or foreign languages
Expand knowledge of how language is used in everyday situations, including classrooms

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 comprises an orientation to pragmatics, introducing a broad definition of the term and the essential notions of the field. The first four chapters explain aspects of pragmatic meaning. Chapter 5 introduces research on the cognitive interpretation required to grasp pragmatic meaning. The following chapter takes up the role of social context, explaining why human beings go beyond the linguistic code itself to pragmatic meaning. All six chapters develop the readers’ ability to understand how pragmatic meaning is created and comprehended. This first part provides the theoretical base for the later teaching-oriented chapters, addressing the following questions:

What is pragmatics? Where does it fit with other forms of language analysis? Where does it fit with regard to formal or theoretical linguistics?
What are the basic analytical notions for carrying out pragmatic analysis?
How do speakers convey pragmatic meaning?
How do listeners understand pragmatic meaning?

Part 2 introduces three major perspectives on the analysis of spoken or written texts: philosophical, sociolinguistic, and cognitive. Each seeks to account for pragmatic meaning in an inclusive framework. This part addresses such questions as the following:

What are speech acts? What are speech events?
What are the underlying principles of communication?
Why do speakers avoid saying or writing what they mean? What is politeness?
What is the role of preference structure in adjacency pairs?
What cognitive processes are involved in interpreting pragmatic meaning?

Part 3 explores the use of pragmatics in the everyday world, addressing the value of pragmatic analysis of extended uses of language. A series
of topics, supported by studies using authentic data, illustrates how pragmatics can expand understanding of the sociocultural contexts of actions. The following questions are addressed:

What role does the listener play in interactions?
How do such features as stress and intonation affect comprehension of meaning?
How can pragmatics inform studies of cross-cultural interactions and misunderstandings?
What can pragmatics contribute to increased understanding of the interlanguage of second or foreign language learners?
How can pragmatics be helpful in research on linguistic and nonlinguistic politeness?
What is the role of the learner’s self-identity in adapting to the L2 pragmatic norms?
What can a knowledge of pragmatics contribute to research on classroom interactions?

The final chapter focuses on the acquisition of pragmatic ability in language classrooms. Taking into consideration the professional development of teachers of second or foreign languages, problems are raised and suggestions made toward informed practice in the learning and teaching of pragmatic competence.

Each chapter contains numerous examples, including instances of naturally occurring talk in English and other languages, collected in a variety of settings. At times, a constructed example is used to efficiently illustrate a concept. Discussion questions and tasks encourage readers to deepen their understanding of the concepts presented.

Note

1. English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) are different learning environments. Most often in this book the terms ESL and EFL are used as synonyms. In the same way, L2 (second language) includes both foreign and other languages (L3) learners may know. A distinction is made only when necessary.