A Definition of Pragmatics

* the study of the practical aspects of human action and thought.
* the study of the use of linguistic signs, words and sentences, in actual situations.
* Pragmatics is the study of how language is used and how language is integrated in context.

Pragmatics outlines the study of meaning in the interactional context.It looks beyond the literal meaning of an utterance and considers how meaning is constructed as well as focusing on implied meanings. It considers language as an instrument of interaction, what people mean when they use language and how we communicate and understand each other.

Jenny Thomas[2] says that pragmatics considers:

* the negotiation of meaning between speaker and listener.
* the context of the utterance.
* the meaning potential of an utterance.

**What would happen to language if Pragmatics did not exist?**

Pragmatics acts as the basis for all language interactions and contact. It is a key feature to the understanding of language and the responses that follow this. Therefore, without the fucntion of Pragmatics, there would be very little understanding of intention and meaning.

We would like to demonstrate this by showing you how life would be WITHOUT Pragmatics:

‘Can you pass the salt?’

**Literal Meaning**: Are you physically able to do this task?  
**Literal Response:** ‘Yes’

**(Pragmatic Meaning:** Will you pass me the salt?  
Pragmtic Response: pass the salt to the speaker.)

**‘What time do you call this?’**

**Literal Meaning**: What time is it?  
**Literal Response**: A time (e.g. ‘twenty to one.’)

**(Pragmatic Meaning:** a different question entirely, e.g. Why are you so late?  
**Pragmatic Response:** Explain the reason for being so late.)

**Pragmatic Contexts**

What exactly are the factors which are relevant for an account of how people use language?

We distinguish several types of contextual information:

1. **Physical context** – this encompasses what is physically present around the speakers/hearers at the time of communication. What objects are visible, where the communication is taking place, what is going on around, etc.

(2) a. I want that book. (accompanied by pointing)

b. Be here at 9:00 tonight. (place/time reference)

1. **Linguistic context** – what has been said before in the conversation. The “history” of things said so far.

(3) a. I can’t believe you said that!

b. If my mom heard you talk like that, she’d wash your mouth out with soap!

1. . Social context – the social relationship of the people involved in communication.

(4) a. # Mr. President, stop bugging me and go home. (You can’t talk like this to the President.)

b. # I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavor to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs. (A bizarre sentence if said to a friend instead of “call me when you get home”.)

**Note:** # commonly used to mark a sentence that is inappropriate for a given context.

1. Epistemic – Knowledge and beliefs of the speaker/hearer.