

## How a Compromise Can Be Reached between Theoretical Pragmatics and Practical Lexicography, a Definition of Pragmatic Information

AKIHIKO KAWAMURA

### 1. Introduction

In spite of the importance of pragmatic information for EFL lexicography there has been scarcely any discussion about what it actually is. Strangely, it has become an important part of EFL lexicography without an agreed definition, which has resulted in confusion with related fields such as sociolinguistics. Considering its importance for foreign learners of English it will be necessary to have a common basis on which the dictionaries' treatment of this information can be judged objectively. Without such a basis it could not be hoped to improve the way that dictionaries treat this information. In this essay, I will therefore try to define the pragmatic information with all the important and relevant issues in mind. As pragmatics and lexicography are distinct both in nature and scope, I will define the pragmatic information, trying to reach a compromise between the two disciplines.

### 2. Existing definition of pragmatic information for EFL dictionaries

While the majority of dictionaries or glossaries of linguistics or applied linguistics do not list pragmatic information as a headword, the *Dictionary of Lexicography* (1998) and the *Oyo Gengogaku Jiten* [Kenkyusha Dictionary of Applied Linguistics] (2003) do have it as an entry. However, the latter just discusses it without explaining what it is. Despite the importance of pragmatic information in EFL lexicography, there is surprisingly,

as far as I know, only one attempt at defining this information. This might also show how ambiguously pragmatics has been treated in the EFL context.

The *Dictionary of Lexicography* defines pragmatic information as follows:

Information on the sociocultural rules of speaking. Exponents include paralinguistic features such as tone and intonation, gesture, pitch etc., as well as choice of vocabulary in terms of politeness and formality conventions, which can reinforce or contradict the speaker's intended meaning. In the past, dictionary compilers have paid little attention to this aspect of communication, merely giving unsystematic indication via USAGE LABELS such as 'informal', 'derogatory', 'sarcastic'.

This definition is perfectly satisfactory as a starting point, but I would like to examine this definition critically in order to identify problems when considering pragmatic information. The definition is arguably incorrect or too sketchy in three respects.

First, even allowing for the fact that EFL dictionaries today have come to pay more attention to spoken English, this definition should be amended concerning its exclusive reference to 'rules of speaking'. Although Moon points out that in conversation there is 'an enhanced range of pragmatic devices' (1998: 352), she also states that conversation 'can be compared to other genres such as technical writing or literary writing' (1998: 352). Pragmatic phenomena are observable in written English as well.

Second, it is very important to note here that, according to this definition, pragmatic information can range from vocabulary to paralinguage. Paralinguage is no doubt closely related to pragmatics, and it must play a crucial role in the EFL context (see for example Hurley, 1992). Accordingly, as defined by the dictionary, there may be nothing wrong in the inclusion of paralinguage in EFL lexicography, or rather it should be ideally incorporated into the dictionaries. Nevertheless, since dictionaries have traditionally dealt with meaning in the form of lexical items, or alphabetical strings, it will be almost impossible for any dictionary to treat paralinguage properly without using many complements, including com-

plicated codes and illustrations, which is obviously against the recent trend towards user-friendliness. More precisely, the use of codes and illustrations will become rather undesirable, especially for the following three reasons:

- (1) The codes will make entries and texts too complicated and easily discourage foreign learners from consulting their dictionaries, especially monolingual ones.
- (2) The explanations of each code in the front matter will necessarily become longer and more thorough, but few users may tackle them (see for example Béjoint, 1981: 216; 219), which suggests that the majority of important pragmatic information will remain incomprehensible to the users.
- (3) The illustrations will take up a lot of space and make it difficult for lexicographers to include the kind of information which, like that on pragmatics, is important for EFL learners but is not appreciated fully among teachers and students (Kawamura, 2002b: 89f).

It is also questionable how lexicographers can gain reliable data on such phonological features as intonation because even the latest spoken corpora are basically no more than a collection of a transcription of spoken English (Moon, 1998: 348f).

Third, the above definition should also be amended concerning its confusion of pragmatics with sociolinguistics. It confines the information to 'the sociocultural rules of speaking', and it will be worth considering whether 'formality convention' should be part of pragmatics. If the use of a particular expression is normally required or expected in a particular social situation, it is generally considered to belong to sociolinguistics rather than pragmatics.

This confusion is also seen in the way that pragmatic information is treated in EFL dictionaries. In the next section, I will consider how the information is actually treated in the dictionaries.

### 3. Confusion over pragmatic information in the way it is treated in EFL dictionaries

Many EFL dictionaries today, either monolingual or bilingual, such as the

*Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (2003: COBUILD4), the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 4th ed. (2003), the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2002) and *Taishukan's Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (2001), mention pragmatic information as one of their merits, but what they regard as information on pragmatics appears rather inconsistent. COBUILD4 is among a few dictionaries which mark pragmatic information in some way, e.g. with labels, and states that when 'some words or meanings are used mainly by particular groups of people, or in particular social contexts' they mark the words and the meanings with 'style and usage' labels rather than with pragmatic ones. In this respect COBUILD4 seems to distinguish pragmatics from its related disciplines such as sociolinguistics, though style and usage may not always be part of sociolinguistics.

However, the entry for *majesty* in COBUILD4 apparently confuses the pragmatic information with that on sociolinguistics:

You use *majesty* in expressions such as **Your Majesty** or **Her Majesty** when you are addressing or referring to a King or Queen.

Although this definition is accompanied with the pragmatic label, **politeness**, it should have a style and usage label if the guidelines for the labels are to be followed. Unfortunately, this criticism also applies to its predecessor, the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2001: COBUILD3), which might suggest that the COBUILD policy on pragmatic information was not sufficiently understood among lexicographers (see also Kawamura, 2002a: 5). Unless lexicographers have a deeper understanding of pragmatic information it will be difficult to eliminate this kind of confusion.

I must also point out that the explanation of a pragmatic label, **formulae** in COBUILD4 is quite misleading:

There are many words and expressions in English which are fairly set, and are used in particular situations such as greeting and thanking people, or acknowledging something (COBUILD4: xiii).

At first sight, **formulae** would seem to cover too wide a range of expressions, if these guidelines for the label were followed. More importantly,

the use of the phrase 'in particular situations' blurs the difference between the pragmatic label, and the style and usage labels. In the explanation of the style and usage labels cited above the lexicographers use the phrase 'in particular social contexts'. Foreign users will naturally wonder what the difference is between 'in particular situations' and 'in particular social contexts'. Since the lexicographers put the examples of *formulae* in the form of the gerund, 'greeting and thanking people, or acknowledging something', they should use another phrase, such as 'in performing a certain action', though pragmatics is not only concerned with speech acts. Importantly, this criticism also applies to COBUILD3 (see also Kawamura, 2002a: 5f). Again, it appears to me, though without complete conviction, that the difference between pragmatics and sociolinguistics is not clear enough even to the lexicographers.

The point is that pragmatics is concerned with almost every aspect of language and sometimes, on the surface, completely overlaps with other levels of language (Kawamura, 2003: 31). The confusion about pragmatic information in lexicography seems to have been directly transferred from that between theoretical pragmatics and its related fields, particularly sociolinguistics. This may be at least partly because pragmatics itself lacks a satisfactory definition.

In this paper I will use my definition of pragmatics as: being concerned with the speaker's command of linguistic resources to realise or make recognisable his/her intent (Kawamura, 2003: 23). In this definition, speaker (hereafter S) refers to a producer of an utterance, including a writer, as distinguished from a person who talks or writes to himself/herself, and linguistic resources refers to every constituent of language ranging from abstract meaning to sociolinguistic knowledge. What I should like to emphasise here is that pragmatics is in fact prior to any other level of language, and that one's intent has complete control over every constituent of language, and makes use of it to realise, or make recognisable his/her intent. As pragmatics can include a very wide range of topics under its heading, I will also restrict the scope of the subject to those cases where S's intent is pragmatically marked, that is, where it goes beyond other levels of linguistics such as irony. Especially in the context of

lexicography, this concept of being pragmatically marked is very important because dictionaries usually have severe space limitation and have to select carefully what information to include. Although I cannot go into details of this definition any further, this is compatible with a general understanding of pragmatics, and the discussions which follow are based on this definition.

#### 4. Pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning

Before moving on to my discussion about what pragmatic information is, I should like to define my use of two more terms: pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning. In this study pragmatic meaning refers to all the phenomena which are studied under the heading of pragmatics, and dictionary meaning refers to the kinds of meaning that dictionaries have traditionally dealt with.

One of the most striking differences between pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning consists in the fact that while the former is almost infinite in scope, the latter is very limited. This may be at least partly because any dictionary is influenced by its physical constraints. The dictionary should normally be a manageable size, and, at least in countries like Japan, easy for students to carry to school, so this imposes a limitation on its size and space, especially in the case of a paper dictionary. The space restriction will also be affected by how the information is laid out, including the size of font. The compilers must carefully select what information to present in a limited space. Dictionary meaning is thus continually monitored and controlled in scope, whilst there is basically no such restriction on pragmatic meaning.

The above disparity in scope leads to another level of difference between pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning. Dictionaries must employ an economical method of presenting as much information as possible in a limited space. Dictionary meaning therefore gets condensed, purified and abstracted with its peripheral parts left out (see also Ikegami, 1996: 38). In contrast, pragmatic meaning is basically the description of those phenomena within its purview, and it sometimes even focuses on the peripheral parts of meaning that have traditionally been excluded in

dictionaries. While pragmatic meaning is concrete in nature based on actual usages, dictionary meaning can be considered as a potentiality or as typicality abstracted from the actual uses (see also Higashi, 1980: 52). It might therefore be possible to compare the difference to that between token and type.

Pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning are distinct both in scope and nature, and so in order for EFL dictionaries to include pragmatic information it will be necessary to reach some compromise between them.

### 5. Discourse and pragmatic functions

It might be possible to define pragmatic information for EFL dictionaries as the part of pragmatic meaning that is accommodated in those dictionaries, but it will soon turn out that this definition does not provide any criterion for determining what the information is, or what portion of pragmatic meaning should be included in the dictionaries. So long as pragmatic meaning and dictionary meaning are distinct both in scope and nature, it is at least necessary to specify what portion of pragmatic meaning can and should be included in the dictionaries. While pragmatic meaning is diverse, the easiest part to capture in dictionaries may be the pragmatic uses of words.

Importantly, some words, mostly function words, do not have meaning in its proper sense. They have uses instead, which fulfil various discourse functions such as emphasisers, or pragmatic functions such as thanking (Moon, 1987: 100). The uses duly reflect S's intent, and they are, inherently, pragmatically marked, in that, as long as they do not have semantic meaning, they usually do not overlap with other levels of linguistic resources such as abstract meaning. In fact, what dictionaries have traditionally done concerning these words is nothing apart from explaining their pragmatic meaning (see also Moon, 1987: 99f).

The point is that there are also many words which have both a pragmatic function and semantic meaning (Moon, 1987: 99f), and their semantic meanings can sometimes blur their counterpart pragmatic functions. It is thus more difficult for learners to recognise their functions and, importantly, learners' failure to recognise that function is likely to cause a

misunderstanding. As Moon proposes (1987: 100), when a word has both semantic meaning and a function, the function needs to be explained clearly as part of its entry in EFL dictionaries.

### 6. Pragmatic biases

Although it is crucial for EFL dictionaries to provide their users with clues to the discourse or pragmatic functions of a word, a word can have more than one such function. Moreover, its functions may vary considerably according to the context. It is thus inevitable that lexicographers should restrict their coverage of the functions. It is worth noting here that many words and/or expressions have a tendency to be interpreted in a particular manner, and that it can result in a pragmatic failure if S and/or hearer do not recognise the tendency. Here, a hearer (hereafter H) refers to a receiver of an utterance, including a reader, as distinguished from a person who overhears an utterance or oversees a piece of writing.

Leech and Thomas (1987: F12) give the following example of a pragmatic failure:

Teacher: James, would you like to read this passage?  
James: No, thank you.

In this example, the British teacher of English requested James, one of his/her foreign students, to read a passage, and the request was seemingly rejected quite rudely. Leech and Thomas observe that the teacher may take James' reply 'as being very rude, or as a bad joke' (1987: F12), but James apparently did not mean to be taken as such. He failed to capture the teacher's intent because the teacher's request was in the interrogative rather than the imperative; he probably did not know that the sentence pattern, *would you like to do something?* was typically interpreted as a request.

In this respect Thomas (1983: 101) points out that there is bias which lets H see one meaning first when interpreting pragmatic ambiguity, just as there is almost always such bias in other linguistic ambiguities such as grammatical ones (Kess and Hoppe, 1981: 95-100), and she attributes the above misunderstanding to James' failure to recognise the bias. In fact,

this kind of conventionalised interpretation, or bias, often realises or makes recognisable S's intent beyond its surface structure, that is, in a way that is pragmatically marked. If the above exchange had taken place between native speakers of English, the teacher's intent would have been realised through the bias in spite of the interrogative construction on the surface. Since these biases are basically finite, more fixed and therefore far easier to capture in dictionaries, it will be effective for EFL dictionaries to focus on this kind of bias typically assigned to certain expressions.

Considering the character of dictionary meaning, dictionaries can and should only deal with most fixed parts of pragmatic meaning. I thus determine the scope of pragmatic information as the part of pragmatic meaning which can be captured through the discourse or pragmatic functions and the pragmatic biases. Any kind of pragmatic meaning which cannot be gained in this way is basically outside the scope of lexicography.

### 7. Criteria for deciding what pragmatic information to include

Facing the fact that any dictionary has a severe limitation of space, the discourse or pragmatic functions and the pragmatic biases may need further restriction. As EFL dictionaries are designed for foreign learners of English, it will be worth considering if it is possible to limit further their coverage from an educational viewpoint.

There is a considerable difference in the degree to which a learner's pragmatic failure could place that learner in difficult situations. While minor failures can only make S and H feel awkward, in the worst case, S and H will not only misunderstand each other's intent but their personality (see also Thomas, 1983: 96f and 110). In James' case in the last section, he was taken as being a rude student without his being aware of it. Thomas suggests that pragmatic failures could be potentially a cause for every instance of what we call national or ethnic stereotypes (1983: 107). Azuma even suggests that they are one of the causes for Japan Bashing (1994: 116). Pragmatic information in EFL dictionaries should ideally be confined to those discourse or pragmatic functions and pragmatic biases, a learner's ignorance of which could cause a serious problem, especially in those cases where S's utterances might sound rude or offensive.

Significantly, it is not always predictable which pragmatic failure could cause serious problems. The teacher misunderstood James due to his failure to recognise the teacher's intent to request, but H's failure to recognise S's intent to request will not necessarily result in a serious pragmatic failure. At the same time, any pragmatic failure can cause a serious problem.

In order to detect potential causes for a pragmatic failure, it is necessary to investigate the socio-cultural difference between English and other languages. For example, while Moon points out that in English 'to borrow a sheet of paper' is slightly different from 'to borrow a book' in that the former does not necessitate the borrower returning the sheet (1987: 101), things to return after borrowing may vary from culture to culture (see for example Thomas, 1995: 130). This kind of difference is basically sociocultural, but it can cause a pragmatic failure. Also, linguistic difference between English and a learner's native language can be a potential cause for the failure.

In the Japanese language, for instance, the translation equivalents of *borrow* and that of *hire* are usually not distinguished. A Japanese speaker uses the same word, *kariru*, which covers both of the English verbs. Accordingly, a Japanese learner of English will often confuse the two English verbs. Although this difference is basically semantic, it might cause a pragmatic failure if a Japanese learner confuses the verbs and utters, 'I'd like to borrow a car' at an office of a car hire company, while in fact meaning that he wants to hire a car.

Unfortunately, relatively little reliable research has been carried out into these differences between English and Japanese. Thus, as far as Japanese learners of English are concerned, lexicographers' intuition will be the only major criterion for deciding which pragmatic uses and biases to include in their works. Far more attention must be paid to this area of study.

### 8. Descriptive versus prescriptive

When considering the treatment of the pragmatic information in EFL dictionaries it will be also important to take into account several issues for

pragmatics in the EFL context (cf. Kawamura, 2002b: 87f). Although they are basically outside the scope of this study, there are at least two important factors which should be kept in mind:

- (1) While pragmatics is closely connected with S's intent, S's intent is not something teachers can prescriptively correct or impose their opinions on (Thomas, 1983: 96).
- (2) Unlike grammar or pronunciation, pragmatics often reflects one's values and/or outlook on the world (Thomas, 1983: 99).

These would suggest that EFL dictionaries should present information on pragmatics in a descriptive manner rather than in a prescriptive way. However, while the description of languages is one of the basic aims of linguistics, the mere description of pragmatic phenomena will not be sufficient for teachers. Teachers should to a certain extent correct their students' mistakes and give them some guidance; they are basically expected to be prescriptive rather than descriptive (Thomas, 1983: 99).

Significantly, it is pointed out that foreign learners sometimes feel pressed to speak a 'superstandard English' (Thomas, 1983: 96; also Schmidt and McCreary, 1977: 429). Kawamura also points out that native speakers occasionally seem too hypercritical about foreign learners' use of English such as *they* referring to single antecedents, while the native speakers themselves often do use the word in that way (Kawamura, 2001: 64–5). It appears that, apart from pragmatics, foreign learners are often expected to speak and behave in the way that native speakers find most preferable. Tsuruta et al. (1988: 11) advise Japanese learners of English to let native speakers take the initiative when speaking in English, perhaps because they believe that by so doing the learners can avoid the native speakers' misunderstanding of them. To follow this advice, however, will discourage the learners from expressing themselves in the way that they want to. Such a dilemma may derive from the fact that even ordinary native speakers have strong authority over foreign learners. This will be truer of teachers and even truer of dictionaries.

Even if the lexicographers claim to be descriptive, most users will not regard their dictionary as simply presenting a description of language,

because the dictionary has very strong authority (Carter, 1989: 150f; Hanks, 1979: 38; Jackson, 1988: 42; Landau, 2001: 6; Moon, 1998: 352). It is also the fact that what ordinary users might want in their dictionary is prescription rather than the accurate description of language (Jackson, 1988: 42; Landau, 2001: 254–61; Moon, 1998: 353), whilst the trend is in fact towards descriptiveness (see also Ikegami, 1996: 280f).

It appears that the real problem lies in the fact that whether dictionaries present the information descriptively or not, ordinary users will not believe that dictionary explanation is just a description of language, or rather they may to a certain extent prefer their dictionaries to be prescriptive. Thus this predicament cannot be resolved until the views of the dictionaries change, which may suggest that some instruction in dictionary use will become necessary in a classroom. Although this may be among the real problems that need to be addressed, this is apparently outside the parameter of this current study.

## 9. Closing remarks

While both pragmatics and dictionaries are concerned with meaning, the kinds of meaning that each of them treats and their coverage are different. Also, pragmatics is concerned with almost every aspect of language. I have accordingly tried to reach some compromise between them, and have determined the scope of pragmatic information as the discourse or pragmatic functions of a lexical item and pragmatic biases assigned to a certain expression.

As EFL dictionaries are designed for foreign learners, the dictionaries should only focus on those functions and biases learners' ignorance of which is more likely to cause serious pragmatic failures, though it may not always be so easy to find out which functions and biases could cause these failures.

I have also recommended that EFL dictionaries should present information on pragmatics in a descriptive manner.

Taking into account the above discussions, I define pragmatic information for EFL dictionaries as the description of discourse or pragmatic functions and pragmatic biases that is presented in an EFL dictionary in

order to help a user avoid a serious pragmatic failure that could potentially be caused by his/her ignorance of them. As this definition clearly shows the scope of the pragmatic information, I believe that this provides a basis on which dictionaries' treatment of the information can be judged with sufficient objectivity.

#### NOTE

This is a slightly revised and shortened version of a paper read at the Macmillan Colloquium on Learners' Dictionaries Today (Tokyo, 11 September 2004): 'How a compromise can be reached between theoretical pragmatics and practical lexicography, a definition of pragmatic information for EFL dictionaries.' This paper is based on Chapter III of an essay entitled: 'How a compromise can be reached between theoretical pragmatics and practical lexicography' submitted to University of Birmingham (November 2003) as part of my coursework. I should like to express my gratitude to my supervisors at University of Birmingham: Dr. Rosamund Moon and Dr. Judith Lamie for their thorough and patient supervision throughout my writing of the original essay. Thanks are also due to my former supervisor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies: Professor Keizo Nomura who gave me invaluable comments on the earlier version of this paper.

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