LING 551: Pragmatics: Language in Use

Scope and content: This course explores the ways in which the meaning communicated by utterances in context can go beyond the narrow semantic content of the corresponding sentences. Various explanations have been proposed both about the reasons why utterances may communicate something more or something different from the sum of the meanings of their constituent parts, and the processes by which this is achieved. We focus on developments in Gricean and post-Gricean pragmatics, discussing such notions as implicature (conventional, generalised conversational, particularised conversational; scalar), explication, and ‘what is said’. We then pass on to theories of speech acts and explore the role of performative language in language change, drawing a distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning. Finally, we introduce conversation analysis and politeness theor(ies), which seek to provide unified frameworks addressing the issues raised by situated language use in different cultures.

Goals: Pragmatics, as the study of language use in context—or, according to Charles Morris, of the “relations of signs to their interpreters”—captures the moment by moment dynamic transformations of meaning according to interlocutors’ goals, background knowledge, and the surrounding situation. Often, explanations of structural patterns or change (e.g. in syntax and semantics) lie with exploitations of pragmatic mechanisms. This course will therefore be of interest to anyone wanting to know about human communication through language, and in particular to students interested in the analysis of meaning in natural language, recent developments in the philosophy of language, as well as social and interactional aspects of language production and comprehension.

Organization: Lecture presentations and guided discussions of set texts. Assessment is by written examination, mid-term (25%) and final (50%). Class participation will is also taken into account (25% of the awarded mark).

Prerequisites: LING 501, LING 507, or consent of instructor.

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