The Infinite Complexity of Language

Reality is the constant articulation of coexisting opposites. Good versus evil, masculine versus feminine, something versus nothing – duality is ubiquitous. The universe exists as a continuous flux of united contradictions. In language, this duality manifests as semantics versus pragmatics.

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that’s concerned with the meaning of words independent from their context. For example, the phrase, “I’m fine,” semantically means the speaker is in a state of well-being. The incorporation of context into this message modifies its’ meaning. Imagine that your wife just came home from work and, upon inquiring how she is, she abruptly responds, “I’m fine.” This definitely doesn’t mean she’s in a state of well-being. To accurately determine the appropriate meaning, the context must be considered. Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that’s concerned with the context dependent meaning. So, taking into consideration her abrupt tone and knowing that work isn’t enjoyable, it’s becomes clear that she really means, “I’m discontent and don’t want to talk about it.” This is the pragmatic interpretation.

Passive aggressiveness exemplifies the duality between semantics and pragmatics. To behave passive aggressively is to passively communicate an aggressive message so as to avoid direct confrontation. The semantic content is passive (nice), and the pragmatic content is aggressive (mean). For example, say someone warned you against something, you decide to do it anyways, and then they say, "Hope it's worth it!" Semantically, they're wishing you well - a kind (passive) message. Pragmatically, they're implying that it could go so bad that you shouldn't do it - a pointed (aggressive) message. Passive aggressive comments have blatant semantic and pragmatic dimensions. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

Communication is difficult. We aim to transmit thoughts, but our nature limits us. Thoughts are exclusive to us alone (minds cannot be read) so they must be translated into a communicable form such as words. Language exists so as to communicate the incommunicable – thoughts. But thoughts are enigmatically physiological, electro-chemical reactions elicited by the firing of neuron, not words. So the translation of thoughts into words is never exact. This is why their inadequacy is a cliché – “I can’t find the right words”/“ Words fail me.” Thoughts are difficult to accurately translate. So difficult that a near infinite amount of words have been invented to compensate. Since no thought is any exact word, they don’t have an exact translation. Each word has a plethora of synonyms to accommodate for this. Slight differences in thought necessitate different words, but no word captures the true essence of any thought/feeling/emotion. This is why the English vocabulary is incredibly vast. No message is an utmost accurate representation of the intended message, but some synonyms have more accurate representations than others. So the better vocabulary one has, the better they’re able to express themselves. Still, new words are invented for thoughts that don’t have an accurate enough translation. Shakespeare needed to describe superciliously pompous behavior, so he invented the word swagger. Even so, Shakespeare is still unable to communicate his message with absolute accuracy because words are not thoughts. Words are merely the inadequate mean through which we communicate thoughts. The impossibility of an exact translation elucidates the importance of pragmatism.

Words fail us, so how do we compensate? Context clues. Without them, a message’s meaning becomes purely semantic and consequently imprecise. The true meaning is contingent upon context. A plethora of contextual factors influence every pragmatic interpretation. For example, the medium through which a message is conveyed. A ‘Hello’ on Facebook is a friendly inquiry, on Tinder it’s flirtatious. A text saying, “Do you want a job?” is probably an offer for a cheap one-day gig. Conversely, that same message via LinkedIn (a professional job-oriented social media platform) is probably an offer for a serious position. Not only is the medium a context, but each medium enables a unique set of additional contexts. Platforms with speech have tonality. An abrupt ‘Hey’ is different from a flirtatious ‘Heyyy.’ Platforms with pictures have colors. The emotions they elicit are dependent on the balance between hue and saturation. Light filters and dark filters elicit their corresponding emotions. Of course, this is all subjective to the interpreter.

The ultimate meaning of words is defined by the interpreter themselves. Everyone uniquely perceives reality, so everyone uniquely perceives messages. The significance of this is exemplified by imagining the difference between Hamlet and an identical transcription serendipitously typed by a monkey. According to the infinite monkey theorem, a monkey typing for an infinite amount of time will almost surely type every possible finite text an infinite number of times. This monkey could theoretically produce Hamlet, and since it would be identical to Shakespeare’s in all physical ways, it would have the same semantic meaning. However, it wouldn’t have the same pragmatic meaning. This is because one’s pragmatic interpretation of a message is contingent upon context clues. These include the medium through which the message is conveyed, and the resulting subliminal cues that medium implies (such as tonality). Importantly, one’s relationship with the author effects this interpretation. Hearing, “How are you?” means different things coming from your mother or from a homeless man. So, if you were to read Hamlet thinking a monkey wrote it, it’s pragmatic dimension would be different than if you read it knowing Shakespeare wrote it. One’s specific attitude towards the author influences the meaning they derive. Monkeys are considered stupid, so reading Hamlet thinking a monkey wrote it would cause the reader to perceive it as elementary fiction. Conversely, however, if one considers Shakespeare stupid, they’ll perceive Hamlet similarly to if they thought a monkey wrote it. Since every perception is unique, everyone derives a unique pragmatic interpretation.

Music is symbolic of the duality between semantics and pragmatics. The notes, taken alone, represent semantics. Without embellishment, they have meaning without context. They’re solely rhythm and pitch, a fraction of music’s diverse potential. Notes alone cannot truly capture a composer’s intentions. A pragmatic dimension is necessary for composers to accurately express their music. This dimension is represented by everything that makes music musical: dynamics, phrasing, and tempo. These are the tools that composers utilize to instill emotions into their compositions. Without them, composers would be unable to accurately translate the music in their minds into audible compositions. Dynamics and phrasing assist notes just like tonality and gestures assist words. Therefore, notes are symbolic of words (semantics) and their embellishment is symbolic of context clues (pragmatics).

Language is infinitely complex. It’s vast intricacies render it impossible to master, difficult to learn, and often confusing to comprehend. Thankfully, an understanding of semantics and pragmatics facilitates accurate communication.