

The Cat in the Act or: Rudolf Carnap, a stepfather of pragmatics?

Jacob L. Mey
University of Southern Denmark

Abstract

This paper deals with the interface between semantics and pragmatics from a dual perspective, as reflected in the very origins of pragmatic research.

Two main approaches can be distinguished: a ‘centrifugal’ one, which starts from semantics, and arrives at a ‘point of no return’, where certain questions cannot be resolved by appealing to what already has been assumed true, nor can they be expanded further without crossing some boundary. (The problem of Lakoff’s cat).

The other approach is ‘centripetal’, in that it starts out from the contextual constraints surrounding human linguistic activity, and asks what the conditions are for performing, say, a successful speech act. Here, the boundary to linguistic reality is reached when we meet problems such as: how to deal linguistically with indirect speech acting. (The problem of Searle’s act).

In a nutshell, the question can be formulated as follows:

Is pragmatics just a necessary extension of semantics? Or is semantics nothing but the intensional complement of pragmatics?

Alternatively, if we cannot claim support for a true interface from any of the opposing factions, should we just let the matter rest, protect our lines of defense, and avoid an open confrontation? (Or, avec hommage à Dr Seuss: If there is a cat in the act, then please don’t wake it up!)

I hope to show that an appeal to the man I have called the ‘stepfather of pragmatics’, Rudolf Carnap, may serve to point us in the right direction of solving the dilemma.

1. Introduction: Forgotten parenthood and an unlikely lineage

Ask people who they consider as the ‘father of pragmatics’, and they will say: Austin, because he wrote *How to do things with words* (1962), for many still the Bible of pragmatic thought.¹ Others may suggest Searle, since he ‘modernized’ Austin and got him an audience beyond the narrow circle of the Ordinary Language Philosophers (OLP). Others will protest and maintain that the later Wittgenstein was the first truly pragmatically oriented philosopher, since he invented the notion of ‘language game’ long before Austin thought of his speech acts.² Others may bring up the Fregean distinction between sense and meaning as the original starting point of pragmatics. And then there is of course Peirce, who did indeed talk about pragmatics as early as 1862, but did nothing with it until about forty years later, in 1901, when he wrote the encyclopedia article which got Morris to jump on the pragmatic bandwagon and (re-)establish the famous triadic distinction: syntax–semantics–pragmatics—as if it all had started with him. In addition, there is an even older ancestry, reaching all the way back to Aristotle and the Sophists.

In the context of contesting and claiming parenthood for pragmatics, I would like to point to a man whom we might call the ‘stepfather’ of the discipline, inasmuch as he made some important remarks on the subject back in the forties of the past century, but never afterwards returned to the subject. The man’s name is Rudolf Carnap, a person one would not immediately associate with pragmatics, but rather with a trend in philosophy that for many represents its absolute opposite: the Neopositivism of the Vienna Circle, later the Chicago School.

In his famous work *Meaning and Necessity* (1946) and even earlier, in the *Introduction to Semantics* (1942), Carnap stated quite bluntly that there is no linguistics without pragmatics; in fact, “pragmatics is the basis of all linguistics” (1942: 13). While this early statement certainly would justify a claim toward pragmatic fatherhood, Carnap must be called a *stepfather* since he did not provide for his intellectual progeny too well; neither did he recognize and promote the fruits of his sayings. But had he bothered to pursue the thoughts laid down in those early principles, he would have had a strong voice in the discussions that to-

day split the pragmatic ranks down the middle: namely, should one accept a pragmatics only if it is linguistically (or even ‘grammatically’) based, as advocated by people such as Levinson (1983), or conversely, should pragmatic studies be based in the broader context of society (what Levinson was wont to call a ‘Continental’ pragmatics)? In more modern terms, such a pragmatics would then be opposed to, e.g., the pragmatics of the ‘London School’ of Relevance Theory, to take one example among many.

What I intend to do in the following is to tease out some threads of the discussion and suggest a few criteria by which we may be able to decide in favor of one or the other interpretation of pragmatics as a discipline, and of its object and methods. In this modern context, I prefer to consider Carnap as one who probably would question the legitimacy of the debating parties’ claims, as long as they do not recognize his original answer to the problem as the only reasonable one. Pragmatics is then not the tail of the semantic dog; on the contrary, pragmatics is the elephant whose legs we blind people grasp and try to identify, each with our own favorite view of the discipline.

2. On ‘pragmatic stepfatherhood’ and its consequences

The two main approaches to pragmatics can be characterized as ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside in’. Representatives of the first approach include Frege and his followers in philosophy and linguistics; among the second group, we find people such as Wittgenstein and Austin. The difference can be illustrated by referring to Lakoff’s use of the human relative pronoun for his clever cat (“who loves to torment me”; 1971: 329) and Austin’s introduction of the speech act as the most important element in human language use (Austin 1962). The difference is that while Lakoff operates from within linguistics (questioning the legitimacy of a ‘human-non human’ distinction in the case of his favorite beast), Austin operates from the outside, asking what an utterance can do in a given context. More generally, the linguist asks: ‘Given this word, what can I use it for?’, while the pragmaticist wants to know what words would be appropriate, given a situation of use.

Now, what’s Carnap got to do with all of this? As I said above, a number of candidates have been proposed for the honorific title of ‘father of

pragmatics’: Frege, Wittgenstein, Austin, to name the most prominent ones. But there is one name that is seldom included in this pragmatic *anakeion*: that of Rudolf Carnap.

As early as 1942, in his *Introduction to Semantics*, Carnap wrote:

[Linguistics] consists of pragmatics, semantics, and descriptive syntax. But these three parts are not on the same level; pragmatics is the basis for all of linguistics ... semantics and syntax are, strictly speaking, parts of pragmatics. (1942: 13)

Carnap writes in the tradition of the Chicago School, the post-Neopositivist paradigm whose emblem was the star-crossed ‘unification’ of the sciences, and whose flagship was the *Encyclopedia of Unified Science* (of which only a few fascicles appeared); however, among the latter was the famous treatise by Charles Morris (1938) in which he redefined the Peirce-Morris triad of ‘syntax, semantics, and pragmatics’.

What Carnap did was to snatch the linguistically relevant parts of the Peircean tradition and set them on a proper footing: pragmatics as the basis of linguistics. But he never elaborated on this sound principle; in fact, the only mention of pragmatics in a later work is to be found at the end of his later, classic work *Meaning and Necessity* (1946), where he makes a passing, programmatic reference to pragmatics as of necessity including semantics (1946: 248). This is why I call Carnap a ‘stepfather’, rather than a true father (or even a strict uncle, in the Roman sense of *patruus*, whose “whiplash words and tongue do make us fear and tremble”; Horace, *Odes* III: 12; cf. Mey 2005): having played a somewhat fatherly role for some time, he then abandons his offspring and leaves the baby in the care of others, most of whom saw fit to throw it out, along with the pragmatic bathwater.

But who were these others, and what did they do/are they doing with the (partially) rescued baby? And having thrown out the baby, where did they dump that water?

To elucidate this point, let me take up a distinction I adumbrated initially, that between Lakoff’s and Searle’s approach: ‘cats’ vs. ‘acts’.

3. Of cats and acts

First off, it behooves us to give Frege a fair chance when it comes to assigning parenthood. There is no doubt that in his famous *Begriffsschrift*, now more than a century and a quarter ago, Frege (1879) put his finger on a distinction that was to be of great significance for our understanding of semantics, and indirectly, of pragmatics. It is the idea that sense and meaning not necessarily or always coincide. In modern terms, one could say that meaning is what the words tell us on account of their semantic content, while meaning tells us how these same words are being used, pragmatically.

The problem is precisely in the way I phrased the last sentence: ‘words are being used’. The emphasis is not on the words themselves, but on their usage as the natural and necessary starting point of our deliberations.

In the well-known case of Lakoff’s cat, the human cat owner uses a word which, according to the strict semantic rules of English relative pronoun use, should trigger a non-animate form: ‘which’. But in Lakoff’s case, for a pragmatic reason, this rule is over-ruled by the attribution of human characteristics (such as ‘cunning’) to this feline. The result is a strictly ungrammatical sequence: ‘My cat, *who* thinks I’m a fool, ...’. Note that I don’t object to the use of the verb ‘think’ in the case of cats: on the contrary, cats do a lot of thinking, even if we don’t always properly appreciate it. But again, those are pragmatic, not linguistic, reflections on the nature of cats.

Lakoff’s cat represents what I call the ‘small picture’: you take a word and inquire about its sense, then establish what kind of meanings it can acquire in a particular context. In contrast, we have the ‘big picture’, where we start from the context and the principles guiding the use of words. If I want to be cooperative, in the sense of Grice (1989), then my speech acts have to respect the maxims laid down by him, as well as (where applicable) some of the conditions that he, along with Austin and Searle, established for the correct use of such acts.

It is true that for many linguists, the innovative character of this approach is not immediately evident. That is because they see the Austin-Searle approach as basically a modified linguistic one. The question they ask is: Given this expression (e.g. a speech act), what can I use it

for? Contrary to this, the truly pragmatic question is: Given this situation, what words can I use to obtain my goals? In other words, pragmatics moves from the outside in; by contrast, linguistics, including semantics and what some (mostly Anglo-American) linguists call ‘pragmatics’, moves from the inside out.

4. The pragmatic split

Unfortunately, the distinction introduced above between the ‘small’ and the ‘big’ picture is not a purely academic one. It has led to the establishment of two very distinct pragmatic traditions. One of these, which for ease of reference I will call the Anglo-American one, is typified by works such as Levinson’s *Pragmatics* (1983) and his more recent *Presumptive Meanings* (2000). The other branch of pragmatic studies, which some have dubbed the ‘Continental’ one (thus Levinson 1983: 6), is typical for works such as my own *Pragmatics: An Introduction* (2001) and for works by non-linguists approaching the world of pragmatics from other viewpoints, such as the communicative one (e.g. Hanks 1996).

The ‘small picture’ notion that pragmatics, in order to be truly scientific, has to base itself on a linguistic (in particular, a semantic) basis, is generally accepted among those who subscribe to the first school of thought. But as a result of this restriction, this kind of pragmatics never transcends the confines of the (extended) sentence; as soon as we get to the level of the text, we cannot possibly force the methods of linguistics down the throats of authors who do not want to be restricted by linguist-imposed constraints.

While such sentence-type restrictions are often conceptualized as extending all the way into the realm of speech acts (cf. e.g. van Dijk 1977) or textual coherence (e.g. Banfield 1982), in the ‘big picture’, the question is not first and foremost to observe a ‘correct’ formulation, but rather to get one’s point across, either directly or indirectly. As the case of that famous can of worms, the so-called ‘indirect speech acts’, shows, there just is no way of constraining a speech act linguistically; we can only describe, and to a certain extent define it, by referring to what it *does*.

As to the wider implications of the ‘big picture’, there is the well-known necessity of accommodating what is often called ‘the social perspective’, a perspective which has recently attracted a number of research initiatives, known under the common denominator of a ‘socially critical’ pragmatics (cf. Mey 2001: ch. 11). Such approaches, while covering the increasingly more exposed flank of a science, already under friendly fire for its parochialism, have at the same time been characterized by its adversaries as losing out on the details, the everyday nitty-gritty of the life of language.

The ‘big picture’, in the eyes of its detractors, is characterized by a lack of accuracy in descriptions, in fact even of a total lack of data-based grounding. And if there are no rules to obey, then (as the saying has it) ‘anything goes’. Pragmatics is a free for all, especially for those who will not bother to write precise descriptions or enact strict rules, or even go out into the field to collect data for themselves. In other words, such a pragmatics is claimed not to be ‘scientific’, and in any case has nothing to say to the modern linguists, who pride themselves on being practitioners of an exact science.

5. The technological angle

Let us take these thoughts a step further, by looking at the interface problem from a slightly different angle, that of the intersection between cognition and technology. Here, I want to refer to a problem that has arisen in the field of studies earlier called ‘Man Machine Interface’, but now usually referred to as ‘Human Computer Interaction’. One of the most pressing questions in this realm has always been and still is, the way humans adapt to computers, or vice versa, how computers are thought of as adaptable to human needs (Mey 1998, 2006).

Certain new developments in the way we look at the computer have spawned a fresh approach to these problems (see Gorayska and Mey 2002, 2004). In particular, work on user-friendly interfaces to expert systems has made us see these systems as extensions of the human mind. Consequently, the locus of control with respect to the language of expression at the interface ought to be placed in the user’s mind and not in the computer (as it was then, and is still predominantly practiced).

And this should be done by enforcing the computer's adaptability to our human needs, rather than by constraining the human user through a forced adaptivity to the machine (Gorayska and Cox 1992; Mey 1998, 2006).

In the eighties and nineties of the past century, studies were carried out in the overlapping area between cognitive processing and the organization and the design of Information Technology (IT) equipment for the working environment. Such studies (often referred to by the label of 'Cognitive Ergonomics'; Card, Moran, and Newell, 1983) focused mainly on problems like the direction of eye movements, the spatial proximity of input sources, and the degrees of complexity in information display. The intention of these studies was to maximize the efficiency with which both the equipment and the information provided were used; they were not directly involved in the pragmatics of providing the information itself, nor did they examine the syntactic and semantic problems involved in these processes, let alone their interfaces. Such studies did involve, however, factors influencing the nature and design of the interface between human cognition and IT processes, including the products that externalized the human thought processes: the software and hardware of an ever more sophisticated computing machinery.

Somewhat later, we witnessed the advent of multi-media, which were anticipated to have a tremendous influence on the delivery of education and training, mass communication and advertising, and manufacturing product design. The flurry of enthusiasm surrounding the development of hyper-text as the ultimate interface testifies to these over-extended, but largely unfulfilled expectations.

During the late nineties and following the turn of the century, a new development, dubbed Cognitive Technology, saw the light of day. It was intended to capture the interface between the rapidly advancing technological developments and the human mental processes of forming cognitive schemata. The term itself, *Cognitive Technology*, was coined to express the necessity of exploring the developmental co-dependence between the human mind and tools it interacted with. To quote an early source,

“Cognitive Technology explores such questions as

- the nature of the information made available due to technological advances;
- how as a result of this information the human/Information Technology interaction influences cognitive developments in humans; and
- how outcomes of such interactions and influences provide feedback effects on future advances in IT.”

(Balasubramanian, Gorayska and Marsh 1993: 4)

In all these developments, the emphasis is on the dialectical nature of the interface. Not only is the user exposed to the tool’s presence, while working with the tool to obtain a better result; also, as a consequence of this involvement with the computer-as-a-tool, being exposed to its ‘toolness’, the user’s view of the task to be performed and of the end product to be achieved undergoes dramatic changes. One could say that the interface strikes back! The mindset with which we approach a task (e.g. as observed in the way we solve a mechanical problem, using a tool) is different from the one prevalent when we didn’t have the tool at our disposal, or didn’t even think of the tool as a possibility. Moreover, this ‘tooling’ at the interface is not just a transitional, ephemeric process; it has lasting consequences for our human cognitive development.

The interface orientation that arises from this kind of thinking has shown itself to be highly fertile in the development of specific tools for, say, the blind using a guided environment in the London underground (Good 1999), or the deaf using a TTY assisted telephone in Hong Kong (Clubb and Lee 1996). Cognitive Technology is neither about cognition only, nor about technology only: it focuses on the interface, but does this in a *dialectical* perspective. As such, it contrasts with the earlier, static thought processes that led to the coinage of the term ‘interface’—a static ‘face’, rather than a fluid, permeable layer of interaction.

The final section will consider the consequences of this interface for the semantics-pragmatics borderline.

6. Interface and pragmatics: Back to Carnap

In a pragmatic context, the first question to ask, of course, is: Whose interface are we talking about?

An interface presupposes (at least) two things having a 'face' in common. 'Face' is a metaphor for the side of an object 'facing' us, as in the 'North Face' of Mt. Everest; in addition, the 'face' is seen as being at the front of the object in question. The human face thus both 'faces' us and 'faces' forward (a face looking backwards is one of the staples of preternatural imagery, like the god Janus' head in Roman mythology, or the head of the little girl in the movie *Rosemary's baby*, turned around 180 degrees to produce a horror effect).

Ideally, the interface is a place where two 'faces' meet and inter-act, as in the case of the human interacting with the computer. But when it comes to discussing the linguistic interface of pragmatics and semantics, a curious thing happens. This 'interface' is usually considered to collect the points where semantics, having met its limits, can no longer cope with the observed facts (as in the case of Lakoff's cat), and has to invoke pragmatics to provide an explanation.

This pragmatic aid, however, is strictly given on the premises of the recipient, in this case, semantics. In other words, pragmatics has to follow the requirements for semantic, that is linguistic, operations, inasmuch as semantics is an officially recognized component of linguistics, whereas pragmatics is not. One of such (very general) requirements for pragmatics, as formulated by Levinson back in 1983, is that there be a linguistic ('grammatical') element that can be identified as uniquely responsible for a particular pragmatic effect. Seen from the pragmatic side, however, such an interpretation defines the 'interface' as a unilateral restriction on what pragmatics is allowed, and asked to do. The semantics-pragmatics interface is biased in favor of the semantics.

In contrast, one could imagine an interface which started out from the pragmatic conditions of an utterance and tried to look for linguistic elements that could help it accomplish its pragmatic obligations. Here, the communicative aspects of language are put up front, leaving the linguistic chips to fall as they may. Unfortunately, these 'falls' are not as neatly definable as are certain other 'cases' in linguistics.³ Every time one

tries to pin down a pragmatic act to a particular, or even a most common, realization one will find oneself frustrated by the apparent lack of rules and regularity in the observed phenomena (think again of the indirect speech acts mentioned above).

This is the reason why most pragmaticists (including myself) have given up on using the notion of ‘rule’ in pragmatics. Pragmatics prefers to deal with *constraints*, restrictions imposed by the context on the feasibility of a particular act (of doing or speaking) in a particular context. The term ‘pragmatic act’ was explicitly coined to capture the various aspects, linguistic and extralinguistic, that surround and define human communicative acting in a particular contextual constellation.

A *pragmatic act* (see Mey 2001: ch. 8) comes close to what earlier has been described as a ‘speech event’ or an ‘activity type’: it comprises both the societal conditions that create the context for acting, and the linguistic conditions that help identify the act, without exclusively defining it. Only in this way can we solve the problems that are posed by phenomena such as the ‘indirect’ speech act, referred to earlier.

From the perspective of pragmatics, every speech act has an indirect element in it, since it is never executed only on the basis of its purported, clearly defined, illocutionary point, directly related to a linguistic expression (an idea that was already identified by Austin and Searle as the ‘illocutionary act fallacy’).

To escape the ‘pragmatic gap’, as symbolized in a Janus face that is uncertain which way to turn between semantics and pragmatics, from Lakoff’s cat to Searle’s act, we have to revert to Carnap’s original insight, as expressed three quarters of a century ago in his dictum: “pragmatics is the basis for all of linguistics”. Doing that, we will find out that there is, after all, a cat in the act—and we do not have to leave it asleep.

References

- Austin, John L. 1962. *How to do things with words*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Balasubramanian, N.V., Barbara Gorayska and Jonathon Marsh. 1993. *Establishment of a Cognitive Technology research group*. Technical Report TR-93-04. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, Department of Computer Science.
- Banfield, Ann. 1982. *Unspeakable sentences*. Boston & London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Card, Stuart K., Thomas Moran and Alan Newell. 1983. *The psychology of human-computer interaction*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Carnap, Rudolf. 1942. *Introduction to semantics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Carnap, Rudolf. 1946. *Meaning and necessity*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Clubb, Orville and C.H. Lee. 1996. A Chinese character based telecommunications device for the deaf. In: B. Gorayska and J.L. Mey, (eds.) *Cognitive Technology: In search of a humane interface*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. pp. 235-242.
- Edmonds, David and John Eidinow. 2001. *Wittgenstein's poker: The story of a ten-minute argument between two great philosophers*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Good, David. 1999. On why the blind leading the blind is a good idea. In: B. Gorayska, J.P. Marsh and J.L. Mey (eds.) *Humane interfaces: Questions of method and practice in cognitive technology*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. 235-250.
- Gorayska, Barbara and Kevin Cox. 1992. Expert systems as extensions of the human mind. *AI & Society* 6:245-262.
- Gorayska, Barbara and Jacob L. Mey. 2002. Pragmatics of technology. *International Journal of Cognition and Technology* 1(1): 1-20.
- Gorayska, Barbara and Jacob L. Mey (eds.). 2004. *Cognition and technology*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Grice, H. Paul. 1989. *Studies in the way of words* (The William James lectures). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- Hanks, William. 1996. *Language and communicative practices*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press.
- Lakoff, George. 1971 [1968]. Presupposition and relative well-formedness. In: Danny Steinberg and Leon Jakobovits (eds.) *Semantics: An interdisciplinary reader in philosophy, linguistics, and psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 329-340.
- Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, Stephen C. 2000. *Presumptive meanings*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Mey, Jacob L. 1998. Adaptability. In: J.L. Mey (ed.) *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*. Oxford: Elsevier. 5-7.
- Mey, Jacob L. 2001. *Pragmatics: An introduction*. 2nd edition. Malden, Mass. & Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mey, Jacob L. 2006. Adaptability in human-computer interaction. In: K. Brown (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Elsevier. 49-55.
- Mey, Jacob L. 2005. Horace and colors: A world in black and white. In: Dag Haug and Eirik Welo (eds.) *Haptacahaptaitis, Festschrift for Fridrik Thordarson on the occasion of his 77th birthday*. Oslo: Novus Forlag & Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning. 163-176.
- Morris, Charles W. 1938. *Foundations of the theory of signs*. (= International encyclopedia of the unified sciences, vol. 2:1). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nerlich, Brigitte and David D. Clarke. 1996. *Language, action, and context. The early history of pragmatics in Europe and America 1780-1930*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Pitcher, George. 1973. Austin, a personal memoir. In: Sir Isaiah Berlin et al., *Essays on J. L. Austin*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 17-30.
- van Dijk, Teun A. 1977. *Text and context: Explorations in the semantics and pragmatics of discourse*. London & New York: Longman.

Notes

1. Cf.: “Everybody *knew* that the ‘father’ of pragmatics was Austin, ...” (Nerlich & Clarke 1996: 373)
2. As Nerlich & Clarke remark, Austin himself was wont to refer back to Wittgenstein as an (albeit somewhat dubious) authority: “he [Austin] often said: ‘Let’s see what Witters [Wittgenstein] has to say about that’” (1996: 372). The quote is attributed to George Pitcher in his *Austin, a personal memoir* (Pitcher 1973: 24). It should be noted, however, that Austin probably had a more sanguine view of Wittgenstein’s thoughts than Nerlich and Clarke assume. Indeed, his references to the great philosopher always carried a bit of typical British irony, perhaps even some anti-Continental bias; Austin didn’t just *refer* to ‘Witters’, but took care to pronounce Wittgenstein’s name as ‘Vitters’, a slangy deformation that certainly did not reflect too much respect for the German philosopher. (For the full story, see Edmonds & Eidinow’s hilarious account of certain happenings in English philosophical circles during the late fifties; Edmonds & Eidinow 2001).
3. ‘fall’ is the original Greek meaning of the grammatical term ‘case’ (Greek: *ptosis*) in the nominal declension.

Reference

Mey, Jacob L. 2011. The Cat in the Act, or: Rudolf Carnap, a stepfather of pragmatics? *KULT 9. Einspruch – Objection – Indsigelse. Essays in Honor of Hartmut Haberland*. 65-78.

KULT is available online at:
www.postkolonial.dk

