

## A SEMIOTIC HISTORY OF PRAGMATICS

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Levinson (1983: 1–5) gives the standard account of how semiotics, the general study of signs, is considered to be fundamental to linguistic pragmatics. The author of the Cambridge Textbook on Pragmatics begins with Charles W. Morris (1901–1979), the founder of a general semiotics first outlined in 1938. Morris's "science of signs" (1938: 1–2) is both broader and narrower than the scope of modern linguistic pragmatics.<sup>1</sup> It is broader insofar as it is not restricted to the study of verbal communication but deals with "signs in all their forms and manifestations, whether in animals or men, whether normal or pathological, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic, whether personal or social" (1964: 1), acoustic, visual, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile. It is also broader since pragmatics, as conceived by Morris, comprises branches of language studies which today fall into the domain of other disciplines of linguistics, such as "psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, and much besides" (Levinson 1983: 2). It is narrower insofar as Morris aims at a science of signs "on a biological basis and specifically within the framework of the science of behavior" (1946: 80) indebted to the positivist paradigm of psychological and social behaviorism. As Levinson (1983: 2–4) points out, the scope of pragmatics became still narrower in the frameworks of logical positivism and analytical philosophy of ordinary language: Carnap (1942) restricts pragmatics to the logical study of language use, for Bar-Hillel (1954) pragmatics is the study of language use involving indexical words, and Montague (1970: 68) conceives pragmatics as a contextual theory of truth conditions founded on intensional logic. Sign behavior, according to Morris, involves three main factors: "that which acts as a sign [the sign vehicle], that which the sign refers to [the designatum], and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter" [the interpretant] (1938: 3). Based on this triad, Morris (1938: 6–7) defines semiotics as a field of study of the following three domains corresponding to three well-known branches of modern linguistics: syntax (or syntactics), the study of the relation between sign vehicles, semantics, the study of the relations between sign vehicles and their designata, and pragmatics, the study of the relation between sign vehicles and their interpreters (cf. Posner 1985).<sup>1</sup> For some time now linguistics has been witnessing a revival of interest in psychological questions, which recently has been matched by growing interest in

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110214260.167/pdf?licenseType=restricted> the social aspects of language and language use. At the same time preoccupation with morpho-syntactic questions has given way to conceptions that explicitly include semantics, and during the past few years „pragmatics“ has become the fashionable slogan.<sup>1</sup> Curiously enough, few linguists seem to realize that the two developments are taking place in the same field, viz. pragmatics in the semiotician's sense: „Linguistic pragmatics“ is being discovered by leaving linguistic semantics in search of an adequate treatment for „presuppositions“, „indexical expressions“ and related phenomena, and catching hold of the philosopher's „speech act theory“ immediately (in particular, Searle, 1969). On the other hand, when psychological questions began to be treated in generative

grammar, this was not seen as a move into the field of pragmatics, nor was it in the name of pragmatics that „sociolinguistic“ studies came to be pursued more vigorously. It is far from clear in current linguistics how pragmatics and linguistics should be related<sup>2</sup>.

Pragmatics and semiotics are important branches of linguistics. They help to understand the context and meaning of the language in its social and cultural context. Pragma-linguistics and linguo-semiotics play an important role in the scientific study of these subjects and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of language.

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