Pragmatics: The state of the art
(An online interview with Keith Allan)

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This interview was conducted with Professor Keith Allan with the aim of providing a brief but informative summary of the state of the art of pragmatics. In providing answers to the interview questions, Professor Allan begins with a definition of pragmatics as it is practiced today, i.e., the study of the meanings of utterances with attention to the context in which the utterances are made. He further notices that discourse analysis, pragmatics, semantics, semiotics, and the philosophy of language are related disciplines, but unlike some other scholar, he does not distinguish 'texts' from 'discourses' in that he sees texts to be the interesting products of discourse. Later, in the course of the interview, he accepts the interviewers' chronological approach to pragmatics, but suggests that any historian of pragmatics would have his or her own version. Further, in his response to a question concerning Mey's Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT), Professor Allan quotes from Mey (2001) to presents a view of pragmemes and practs. He further suggests that there is no bound on the number of possible hypotheses (theories) of language structure and usage, and that all theories are worthy of consideration provided that rational grounds can be advanced for the assessment of different hypotheses. The future direction of pragmatics, in Professor Allan's view, will rely on corpora in that corpora provide bodies of naturally occurring texts which can be used to test any theoretical claims in pragmatics.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Pragmemes; Practs; Corpora; Component Era; Socio-Cognitive Pragmatics; Neo-Gricean Pragmatics; Optimality-Theoretic pragmatics, Relevance-Theoretic Pragmatics; Discourse; Text

The Interview

MASN:[1] How would you define pragmatics today? How is it different from traditional Greek rhetorics? What are its basic tenets?

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[1] Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan

KA:[2]   Today's pragmatics studies the meanings of utterances with attention to the context in which the utterances are made. An utterance is a sentence or sentence fragment used by a particular speaker/writer on some particular occasion. The study of rhetoric was and is primarily the study of the most effective way to present an argument or point of view in order to persuade an audience to accept that argument or point of view and adopt it so as to act on it and propagate it. This may involve countering an opposing point of view. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1984) contains ideas which are quite similar to some of the four categories of conversational maxims identified in that seminal work of pragmatics, Grice's 'Logic and conversation' (Grice, 1975). However, whereas Aristotle's speaker is, more often than not, adversarial—someone who carries dialectic into rhetoric—Grice's speaker is part of a cooperative dyad, and therefore someone who is typically not adversarial—see Allan (2004) for more details.

MASN: What kind of interface do you see between discourse analysis, pragmatics, semantics, semiotics, and the philosophy of language?

KA: These are related disciplines. I'd say that linguistics is a branch of semiotics and all of discourse analysis, semantics and pragmatics fall within linguistics. The philosophy of language is just that, but many philosophers of language have similar goals to students of semantics and pragmatics. Discourse analysis I take to be the analysis of texts and discourses (I wouldn't distinguish texts from discourses, but some people do); the analysis of discourse relies on inquiry into semantics and more particularly, pragmatics, though, conversely, investigations of semantics and pragmatics need to consider the meaningful behaviour of language in texts. One can say that semantics is a somewhat decontextualized property of a language whereas pragmatics must invariably take account of language in the context of its use on particular occasions by a speaker/writer.

MASN: Why is it that you do not distinguish texts from discourses? Could you please expatiate on this and provide your reasons?

KA: I guess it is because, for me, the interesting product of any discourse

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[2] Keith Allan

is the text, i.e. the set of sentences/utterances that result from it. Such texts, whether generated by a single author or multiple authors, offer data for the kind of linguistic analysis that interests me.

MASN: Is there any interface between pragmatics and applied linguistics? How can they promote each other?

KA: If one understands 'applied linguistics' to mean the teaching of language, then obviously teaching how to use language competently and appropriately is a part of its mission. If 'applied linguistics' is the application of linguistics to some problem then one might stretch the point by saying that pragmatics applies the methodology of linguistics to the study of meaning within contexts of language use.

MASN: The burgeoning pragmatic literature much of which has been written in English has resulted in a blurred view of what pragmatics is all about—at least for people who learn English as a foreign, second, or international language. To my knowledge, no one has ever attempted at providing a clear map of pragmatics for the people who are not versed in the field. If I wanted to use a chronological approach to pragmatics, my timeline for pragmatics would include five major pragmatic eras: (1) the pre-Gricean era, (2) the Gricean era, (3) the component era, (4) Mey's era of pragmatic act theory, and (5) Kecskes' era of socio-cognitive pragmatics—in that order. Within the component era, I would distinguish four main camps: (a) speech act theory, (b) neo-Gricean pragmatics including theories of politeness, (c) optimality-theoretic pragmatics, and (d) relevance-theoretic pragmatics. Would you agree with my view of the history of pragmatics? If you wanted to give our readers a helicopter sight of the general map or the chronological timeline of pragmatics, (1) what distinct phases, areas or camps within pragmatics would you perceive, (2) how would they be connected but/or different, and (3) what would their chronological sequencing be?

KA: There is nothing wrong with your story, though my own account would be different and, I suspect, any historian of pragmatics would have his or her own version—compare Allan (2010), Huang (2007), Mey (2013), Nerlich and Clarke (1996), Seuren (1998). Modern pragmatics had forebears, e.g. the Stoics (third century BCE to third century CE), Apollonius (second century CE), Augustine (5th

century CE), Abelard (12th century), and Reid (18th century) discussed differences among what would later be called illocutions: assertions, questions, commands, supplications, promises, contracts, prayers, and wishes as 'acts of social intercourse between intelligent beings' (Reid, 1785, pp. 72-74)—thus presaging speech act theory. I would add at least Austin, Searle, Kent Bach, Horn, Levinson, and Recanati to your list of important contributors to recent pragmatics; but in truth many more topics can be adduced— See Allan and Jaszczolt (2012) for comprehensive discussion.

MASN: We know that Mey (2001) has introduced a new field which he calls the pragmatic act theory (PAT) in which he conceptualizes 'pragmemes' and 'practs'; how exactly do you define practs and pragmemes? How do you differentiate between them? In your view, what are the basic tenets of Mey's pragmatic act theory? What are its merits? What do you think was his motivation for theorizing it, and (why) do you see it as important?

KA: To quote Mey, "The theory of pragmatic acts [... focuses] on the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as on what is actually being said. [...T]he emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual (or an individual's) speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation; such a generalized pragmatic act I will call a 'pragmeme'. The instantiated individual pragmatic acts, [...] 'practs', refer to a particular pragmeme in its realizations" (Mey, 2001). So, pragmemes identify those properties of a situational context that bears on language which might be appropriate to that context. For instance, it seems to me that referring is a pragmatic act of a certain kind but a particular occasion of referring, for instance my referring here to Jacob Mey, is a pract—a particular instance/occurrence of the pragmeme of referring. Certain contexts may favour a particular speech act, e.g. when conditions for the offering of condolences exist, but the speech act of condoling is what a speaker does within the situation of a person's misfortune that constitutes the relevant pragmeme. The pragmeme in part determines the felicity conditions on the act of condoling. A pract is a particular occurrence of such an event.

MASN: In your view, what sorts of considerations does one need to take into account when undertaking research in pragmatic act theory?

What are the possible pitfalls for researchers who undertake such research? How can these pitfalls be avoided?

KA: My answer to this would be no different from my answer to the conditions on any linguistic research: although introspection and imaginary scenarios are necessary in linguistic research these should always be backed up—where possible—with what is found in natural language usage, i.e., from spoken and written corpora (including works of literature). It is also wise to bear in mind that any hypothesis about language structure and usage is a fallible model that will always be open to revision as more information comes to hand and language continues to evolve.

MASN: What criticism would you level against pragmatic camps other than Mey's PAT? What criticisms (if any) would you expect to be levelled against Mey's PAT? How would you resolve them?

KA: Presupposed in the last sentence of my previous response is that there is no bound on the number of possible hypotheses (theories) of language structure and usage. I welcome all points of view being expressed. Individuals will evaluate them differently, believing one incorrect, another mostly correct, and so forth. Provided rational grounds can be advanced for the assessment of different hypotheses then all are worthy of consideration. But in any case, Mey's proposal is not sufficiently comprehensive to encompass all of language usage—as I suspect Jacob himself would agree. Other hypotheses (theories) focus on different aspects of language usage and should be viewed in that light as making valuable contributions to research into language.

MASN: Which direction(s) do you think pragmatic studies will take in future?

KA: Hopefully with greater reliance on corpora.

MASN: Why do you see corpora as important to the future direction of pragmatic research? Could you please provide more detailed information on this?

KA: Yes, I think the application of any theoretical claims should be tested against bodies of naturally occurring texts which can be obtained from corpora. I do not restrict the notion of corpus to extensive corpora such as the British National Corpus and the

Corpus of Contemporary American English, but include data from novels like Zadie Smith's *NW* and newspapers/magazines such as *The Times* and *The Root.*

MASN: What are the implications of pragmatics for language teaching?

KA: It is surely obvious that for language teaching the instruction of pragmatic competence is just as important as teaching grammatical competence—perhaps more so. So, language teaching needs to be well-grounded in the findings of pragmaticians.

MASN: Thank you very much for accepting this interview invitation. It means a lot to me and the readers of the journal. It was a huge honor for me to be given this opportunity to conduct this interview. Thank you.

KA: Thanks for your interest in my opinions.

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