

El texto en su contexto. Aproximación pragmática a BELOVED de Toni Morrison

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Resumen

La pragmática es una disciplina de la lingüística que debe ser definida como el estudio de la lengua en su contexto. Los intercambios comunicativos solo pueden ser explicados en referencia a las limitaciones de la interacción social. Este artículo, a través del análisis de un breve pasaje de la novela de Toni Morrison BELOVED, ilustra los principios fundamentales del discurso pragmático. Conceptos como implicatura, actos ilocutivos o enriquecimiento proposicional deben ser entendidos en función del papel que desempeñan en un intercambio comunicativo dado que la interpretación de cualquier enunciado deriva no de su significado sino de su fuerza ilocutiva.

Palabras clave: Contexto, relevancia, implicatura, explicatura, actos ilocutivos, pragmática, enriquecimiento proposicional, enunciado, (des)codificación.

Title: Understanding Texts in Context. A Pragmatic-based Approach to Toni Morrison's BELOVED.

Abstract

Pragmatics is a division of Linguistics formulated as the study of language in context. There are linguistic exchanges that can only be explained by reference to the constraints of social interaction. This article illustrates, with a brief passage by Toni Morrison's BELOVED, the fundamental principles of pragmatic discourse. Concepts like implicature, illocutionary acts or propositional enrichment can be understood by looking at the role they play in any communicative exchange given that utterance interpretation is determined by illocutionary force rather than meaning.

Keywords: Context, relevance, implicature, explicature, illocutionary act, Pragmatics, propositional enrichment, utterance, (de)coding.

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INTRODUCTION TO PRAGMATICS

The notions of coding and decoding were aspects that long occupied the attention of grammarians in the 1970s. However, the awareness of problems that were troubling to traditional grammars -which came to be seen as limited formal systems - together with the increasing interest in communication prompted linguists to study language from a different perspective. The study of natural language from a theoretical approach was no longer enough or even effective. A more practical orientation was in need. This inevitably led to the emergence of a discipline whose main goal was to bridge the gap between language and reality. This new discipline, known as Pragmatics, seemed to allow explanation of linguistic problems that traditional grammatical systems used to confront but could not solve. While grammars focused upon language itself, Pragmatics came to study language in relation to the appropriate contextual framework where utterances were produced. As a result the direction of linguistics changed a great deal over the years: from coding and decoding to communication - from competence to performance -. The purpose of Pragmatics is, among other things, to analyze the initial lack of connection between sentences in adjacency pairs of the type:

- A) *Did you like the film?*
- B) *I fell asleep.*

In spite of the apparent gap between sentence A and sentence B, it is always possible to find the relation between both utterances and reach an interpretation that extends far beyond the literal meaning of words, which immediately leads us to make a distinction between two types of meaning (stable and non-stable meaning) and therefore to mark the limit

between what is said and what is meant. One single sentence is subject to multiple interpretations since it is context-dependent. Stable meaning, conceived of as the first layer or level of analysis, is always realized in context. When dealing with natural language we must handle more than what is codified. The contextual environment where sentences are produced and the working of an inferential process help the speaker seek the intended meaning of any utterance. We do not exclusively deal with stable meanings. Context plays a basic role as it serves the purpose of constructing inferential or non-stable meanings.

The dichotomy between sentences (full grammatical constructs) and utterances (the way we actually speak), somehow related to the domains of text and speech respectively, is another aspect that we should keep in mind. It is essential that we should distinguish between ideal models, considered as context-free, and the universe of discourse, where contextual effects are unavoidable. This distinction is necessary to show that language is not restricted to ideal sentential structures. Grammar is necessary but cannot account for everything.

The problem of formalization when dealing with non-stable meaning soon arises, so that it is necessary to find some kind of formal framework to prevent Pragmatics from being arbitrary. Standard logic is one possible option, but it is not adequate as we are working with natural language. The type of reasoning used in human interaction differs completely from the unambiguous model adopted in metalanguage. The shortcomings of logic are derived from the same premises upon which it is built. Logic is governed by the constitutive rule of false and truth values, but natural language cannot remain in that realm. Many times language works independently of metalanguage and cannot be reduced to logical connectors. The intersection of a wide range of linguistic phenomena such as referring expressions, linking words or contextual meaning shows that the conventional procedure of logic, restricted to stable meanings, turns out to be quite limited. However, an inferential process such as the one represented by the connectors [if...then] has come to solve the problem of arbitrariness.

The definition of Pragmatics as *meaning minus truth values* reveals that natural language cannot be described only in terms of false and truth models since it is ambiguous and we move in the realm of interpretation. The recognition of the logical structure of a sentence is, to some extent, necessary, but an inferential model is needed to deal with those areas of language that metalanguage cannot cover.

The conclusion that arises is the following: Pragmatics springs up to research those areas of language where logic cannot operate or where logical connectors are dismantled. Pragmatics works in response to the shortcomings of metalanguage in order to explain all the nuances of meaning that formal logic fails to account for. Since natural language is not constrained to truth values, a new type of formalization based on some kind of cognitive orientation will be required.

BASIC CRITERIA APPLIED TO TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

Let us now turn to mention the mainstays on which to build up the pragmatic analysis of "*Beloved*". We need to establish the criteria to follow in order to carry out textual interpretation. Therefore we shall play with such concepts as *implicature* or *explicature* together with the notions of literal and indirect meaning. This study will also require reference to other aspects of the pragmatic domain such as *relevance theory* or *propositional enrichment*. The main feature that we are to explore is utterance interpretation.

In "*Beloved*" we will devote our analysis to the study of the speaker's (or the characters') communicative intention, equivalent to meaning-*nn* in Grice's own terms. In so doing, we need to be able to make an important distinction between the invariable content of an utterance and the extra-meaning obtained from the context surrounding that utterance. In other words, we have to recognize the divergence or contrast between stable and contextual meaning. Context plays a crucial role in the interpretation of any utterance. The shift from one context to another, as will be demonstrated later on, invariably yields to variation in meaning. We must therefore focus on the contributions of contextual information to utterance interpretation. As we are working on texts, we - as readers - should bear in mind that contextual information is going to be supplied by the narrator, who intends to create a particular context in order to lead the reader to a specific interpretation.

To go one step further we may observe in the context of this novel that speakers or characters convey messages that are quite different from the stable meaning of their utterances. What they say often goes beyond the limits of the literally stated. Putting it another way, they convey something in addition to the literal meaning of the words that they use. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with context-dependent information. We have to discover the extra-meaning underlying a speaker's utterance in order to derive the right sort of interpretation.

Context enables the hearer (or reader) to recover what has been implicitly conveyed insofar as any speaker means more than what (s)he actually says. It will be necessary to unfold the intended meaning of an utterance in order to make sense. We must not forget that the most accessible interpretation is the one consistent with the principle of relevance, that is to say, the one involving the least processing effort. But the search for the most relevant interpretation brings with it the selection of the appropriate context. Before we proceed any further, let us put forward a clear definition of the notion of context by quoting Sperber and Wilson:

"A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation." (1986: 15-16)

The phenomena of disambiguation, closely related to propositional enrichment, will not be thoroughly explored. Such matters will only receive a light treatment. We do not aim to study all cases. Only those instances that we view as relevant for utterance interpretation will be considered in this analysis. Even though different concepts have been covered, the main strength of this work has been the recovery of additional meaning, that is, the recovery of what has been implicitly communicated. The interaction between utterance and context, synonymous with the working out of implicatures, will become our central concern.

PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF "BELOVED"

(Contextualization: The era of slavery has come to an end. Paul D and Sethe, two ex-slaves, try to make a life together. Paul D has just moved to Sethe's house, but he must confront the opposition of her daughter, who treats her mother's partner as an intruder.)

"Pleasantly troubled, Sethe avoided the keeping room and Denver's sidelong looks. As she expected, since life was like that - it didn't do any good. Denver ran a mighty interference and on the third day flat-out asked Paul D how long he was going to hang around.

The phrase hurt him so much he missed the table. The coffee cup hit the floor and rolled down the sloping boards towards the front door.

"Hang around?" Paul didn't even look at the mess he had made.

"Denver! What's got into you" Sethe looked at her daughter, feeling more embarrassed than angry.

Paul D scratched the hair on his chin. "Maybe I should make tracks."

"No!" Sethe was surprised by how loud she said it.

"He know what he needs," said Denver.

"Well, you don't," Sethe told her, "and you must not know what you need either. I don't want to hear another word out of you."

"I just asked if -"

"Hush! You make tracks. Go somewhere and sit down."

Denver picked up her plate and left the table but not before adding a chicken back and more bread to the heap she was carrying away. Paul D leaned over to wipe the spilled coffee with his blue handkerchief.

"I'll get that." Sethe jumped up and went to the stove. Behind it various cloths hung, each in some stage of drying. In silence she wiped the floor and retrieved the cup. Then she poured him another cupful, and set it carefully before him. Paul D touched its rim but didn't say anything - as though even "thank you" was an obligation he could not meet and the coffee itself a gift he could not take.

Sethe resumed the chair and the silence continued. Finally she realized that if it was going to be broken she would have to do it.

"I didn't train her like that."

Paul D stroked the rim of the cup

"And I'm as surprised by her manners as you are hurt by 'em."

Paul D looked at Sethe. "Is there history to her question?"

"History? What you mean??"

"I mean, did she have to ask that, or want to ask it, of anybody else before me?"

Sethe made two fists and placed them on her hips. "You as bad as she is."

"Come on, Sethe."

"Oh, I am coming on. I am."

"You know what I mean."

"I do and I don't like it."

"Jesus," he whispered.

"Who?" Sethe was getting loud again.

"Jesus! I said Jesus! All I did was sit down for supper! and I get cussed out twice. Once for being here and once for asking why I was cussed in the first place!"

"She didn't cuss."

"No? Felt like it."

"Look here. I apologize for her. I'm real -"

"You can't do that. You can't apologize for nobody. She got to do that."

"Then I'll see that she does." Sethe sighed.

"What I want to know is, is she asking a question that's on your mind too?"

"Oh no. No, Paul D. Oh no.""

TAKEN FROM: Morrison, Toni (1987). *Beloved*. London: Picador, pp. 43-44.

Let us begin with the first utterance: "... *how long he was going to hang around.*" The child's question, raised through the voice of the narrator, can be taken as an outburst of her uneasiness and of all the anger contained over the last three days as a result of the presence of Paul D at home. Her anger is made manifest through the observation of non-linguistic information. The way Denver looks at them ("*sidelong looks*") is plenty communicative as it reveals that there is something about Paul D she does not like. The narrator constructs a specific context and recreates a tense atmosphere between these three people. This context reveals that the child does no longer accept the presence of Paul D. It is necessary to put the reader in the picture of this previous stage, that is, the context of the child's emotional state in order to create an interpretation of her utterance, which is not merely a request for information. She does not want to know the period of time that Paul D is going to stay with them. Rather Denver is trying to convey something more significant. She has implicitly "invited" Paul D to leave. Invitation, request and complaint are various illocutionary acts conveyed through a single utterance. By means of the information supplied by the narrator we also know that Denver had been running a "*mighty interference*". Her question must subsequently be interpreted as part of her plan to keep Paul D away from her mother.

A request to leave is encoded in the form of an indirect question and therefore has directive force. The more cumbersome sentence *“how long he is going to hang around”* is then used in preference of a simple directive like *“go”* or *“go away”*, implicit in the child’s words. The term *jussive* is more appropriate in the context of the child’s request as imperatives can take various forms. By adopting the form of an interrogative sentence, her utterance is less rude and therefore more deferent, more polite. The difference between a request and a command is that a command involves the authority of the speaker whereas a request does not. In a request the addressee has the right of non-compliance. In a command, on the other hand, the addressee is expected to comply. Paul D shows compliance with the directive issued by Denver as it can be interpreted as an attempt to get him out of their lives. What he understands is therefore not pleasurable to him for it is not a request. On the contrary, it has been decoded as an indirect order.

Knowing who the speaker is (let us call Denver Paul D’s stepdaughter) together with her attitude for the past few days helps us work out the implied meaning contained in the child’s initial question. A thorough interpretation of her words must be analysed in this particular context of utterance, i.e., it must be decoded in interaction with this contextual knowledge of *“mighty interference and sidelong looks”*. As we have seen, communication is incremented with paralinguistic information. This context is significant insofar as it enables Paul D to realise that Denver is conveying much more information than the actually stated. The following implicatures could be drawn from the child’s question:

1. I wish you were not here
2. I want you to go
3. I do not want to make room for you in this family. This shows in addition my dislike for you

Denver’s question has a devastating effect. She has succeeded in communicating her intention as Paul D feels outraged. We must resort to contextual information once more, to all the mess he has made as an immediate effect to that question (*“The question hurt him so much he missed the table. The coffee cup hit the floor and rolled down the sloping boards towards the front door”*), because he has inferred from Denver’s words that he is not welcome. Denver does not accept him as a new member of the family, but only as a temporary visitor.

If Denver asks him how long he is going to hang around, Paul D must assume –as he confirms with his answer *“maybe I should make tracks”*– that she only expects him to stay home for a limited period of time. She does not expect him, as he intends, to live with them on a permanent basis. Paul D must conclude that the child is waiting for him to leave. He does not tell her whether he is going to stay for two days or three months, as that is not what the child is asking. With the statement *“maybe I should make tracks”* Paul D utters or reproduces the words that Denver has implicitly conveyed. As a result, the implicature contained in her question has been successfully decoded. Once the extra-meaning has been recovered and an interpretation has been made, a reinforcing utterance, in a kind of confirmation process, will be produced (*“he know what he needs”*) in order to counteract her mother’s opinion, who thinks that Paul D should not go away. Denver is opposing Sethe, conveying in an indirect way that what she wants is the opposite of what her mother wants. With this second implicature, Denver is strengthening Paul D’s initial assumption and thus ensuring the rightness of his interpretation.

Denver’s first implicature shows her intention that Paul D should go. Once she realizes that he has fully understood what she wishes, the second implicature should be interpreted as a reinforcement of that intention. Denver tries to convey the opposite of what her mother has just said. By saying *“he know what he needs”* she is implying (and insisting) *“yes, he must go”* as opposed to Sethe’s opinion *“no, he must stay”*. If Paul D has made a decision to go away, Denver backs his decision. What Denver means is not explicitly communicated in neither of these two utterances. She keeps on implying things and never cancels out Paul D’s interpretation. On the contrary, she confirms in an indirect way that he is not mistaken.

The following exchange, *“Is there history to her question?”*, could be analysed as an example of communicative failure. The answer is derivable from the question itself. The speaker, Paul D, is attempting to produce a relevant utterance, but he fails to do so. Given that Sethe does not arrive at any interpretation, -she is unable to find relevance- she asks him to clarify. In other words, she alerts him to the obscurity of his question. Sethe provides an utterance such as *“What you mean?”* in search for the elucidation of any possible intended meaning as she has no clear idea of what Paul D might have communicated. Relevance theory was defined by Crystal (2008) as:

“A theory of communication and cognition which claims that human cognition is geared to the maximizing of relevance (...). New information is relevant if it interacts with old information to produce various contextual effects, and the more contextual effects it produces the more relevant it is. On the other hand, the more processing effort it involves the less relevant it is. The theory claims that all communicative acts carry a guarantee of optimal relevance – a guarantee that they have enough contextual effects and require no unnecessary processing effort – and that they are interpreted in the light of this guarantee”

Sethe responds to the question but she has not given an answer. Had she replied “*yes, there is history to that question*”, she would have actually provided an answer, but in responding “*what you mean?*”, she has not. She responds to his question by asking another question. In performing the illocutionary act of questioning, Paul D has implicitly answered the question himself in the context of his subjective perception of the child’s previous attitude and nasty reaction. Paul D does not intend to elicit an answer from Sethe. His utterance has the form of an interrogative clause, but when said to his addressee, we would not normally take it as a request for information. Rather he is expressing his annoyance and his conviction that there were other men in Sethe’s life before him. Although it has the form of an interrogative clause, Paul D’s utterance is most naturally used to make a statement. He has identified some previous behavior in Sethe’s life and is simply asking for confirmation of his deep-held assumptions, which must be either true or false. He is uninterested in what Sethe has to say, in the truthfulness or falseness of her response, as he is not waiting for an answer at all. In his twisted realm of assumptions, Paul D has invariably reached a conclusion. He has committed himself to the truth of his presupposition and simply needs reassuring by asking for confirmation of that initial assumption. We are not analysing Paul D’s question as a syntactic category but as a semantic one. Denver’s question intends some future action on her addressee. She intends Paul D to carry out the action of leaving home, and Paul D subsequently complies with her directive by responding “*Maybe I should make tracks*”.

There is no identification of his implicature. Paul D’s utterance does not satisfy the principle of relevance. Sethe is not capable of deriving contextual implications. The scope of meaning that he has conveyed is not accessible to her. That is why she tries to look for coherence. Since his question remains quite unclear to Sethe, Paul D will try to clarify what he means by resorting to the mechanism of employing a new implicature in order to make his utterance more transparent. He is not explicit at all since he has attempted to elicit information in an indirect way once more.

Before proceeding with the working out of Paul D’s implicatures, let us now turn to the problem of assigning reference to an ambiguous element contained in the utterance “*did she have to ask that, or want to ask it, of anybody else before me?*” “*Anybody*” does not have any gender distinction. It could be either male or female. Disambiguation depends on a process of propositional enrichment in interaction with contextual information. Once an ambiguity analysis has been carried out and the indeterminate element has been disambiguated, that is, once we have access to propositional meaning and everything is made clear, we have to resort to the context again in order to derive the right sort of interpretation. The problem becomes much more complex. We are faced with a serious drawback here insofar as the context does not carry the traces of a male antecedent, or of any antecedent at all. It is supposed, by taking into account Sethe’s violent reaction, that she takes Paul D to mean there were other men before him. This is the propositional enrichment Sethe seems to have given to the term “*anybody*”. This term conveys a great deal for her. No other men were mentioned in the course of the conversation. Given that the context does not disambiguate a word like this, her interpretation could be easily cancellable, but in fact it is not. The assumption that Paul D is inquiring into Sethe’s sentimental past, i.e., that he is asking her whether or not she has lived with other men is much more accessible than the assumption that she, let us say, has lived with her mother. If her mother had been selected as the referent for “*anybody*”, there would have been no reason for getting as furious as Sethe does. Her anger helps to create meaning. A context like this (a marital argument) invites the following interpretation, which can be roughly glossed as: “*It is expected that Denver’s dislike for me derives from the presence of other men in the house*”. The person asking her this question is her partner, the man with whom she is sharing her life at the moment, and we also know that he was, in addition, embittered by Denver’s question. Knowing the identity of the speaker is also significant to derive an interpretation. Sethe’s disambiguation and enrichment of the word “*anybody*” seems to be the most relevant one according to this context.

“*What you mean?*” would be equivalent to a threat. Its illocutionary interpretation applies to linguistic as well as to paralinguistic information. “*Hands on hips*”, “*loud voice*” and “*intent look*” all add meaning to a simple question like this. A

question is used in issuing a threat. The force of Sethe's utterance is marked by paralinguistic factors. The correct interpretation depends on such extralinguistic information. Sethe has no authority over Paul D, but paralinguistic gestures and looks serve to decode meaning and arrive to the right interpretation. Sethe deliberately adopts a loud voice to communicate a particular emotional state of anger and disbelief. The whole of her utterance is thus influenced and modified by surrounding features to signal a specific attitude towards Paul D.

Let us continue now with Sethe's answer: *"you as bad as she is"*. We must think that since Paul D has asked her a question, she must have provided an answer, and that her answer is relevant. What she has communicated is waiting to be decoded in context. To know what Sethe means we also need to know that her utterance is an expression of her outrage, indignation and annoyance, as the narrator tells us by resorting to paralinguistic information (*"fists on her hips"* to describe her fury and outrage or even the tone of her voice, as Sethe was probably getting loud). Sethe's behavior tells us something about her communicative intentions. Sethe is hurt by Paul D's words, by what he has thought of her. It is precisely in the context of her feelings towards him that Paul D must try to discover what she actually means. If Sethe is offended by what Paul D has implicitly conveyed with his question, we must think that he has said something wrong, something which has discredited her. By feeling outraged Sethe is telling him that he is mistaken. Therefore the implicature that Paul D has recovered is: *"No, there were no other men before you"*.

Paul D raises an indirect question and receives for an answer an indirect utterance as well. By uttering *"you know what I mean"* Paul D is not cancelling Sethe's interpretation; rather he is minimizing its negative effect. He is just saying there is nothing wicked in his question and that he is not that bad. His utterance is directly connected with another one: *"...for asking why I was cussed in the first place"*. Paul D is looking for the reason why the child had asked him that initial question, but deep down he intends no disrespect for Sethe. As we can see, things become much more explicit as the conversation proceeds. What Paul D is saying is that he did not mean to be as wicked as Sethe thinks, but Sethe answers him back: *"I do and I don't like it"*. She has taken his words to be more offensive than what he intended them to be. There is clearly some misunderstanding in relation to the scope of Paul D's question and his real intentions when asking that question.

Let us turn now to the final utterance: *"what I want to know is, is she asking a question that's on your mind too?"*. What was said further back at the beginning of this conversation could be used as context to identify the speaker's intention. In so doing, the processing cost has been reduced. This context is mutually taken for granted. Paul D's question refers back to the preceding discourse, i.e., to Denver's initial question. Both utterances are logically connected. The interpretation of the first one can be taken as the basis to decode Paul D's intended meaning. Sethe is connecting the interpretation of this new utterance to what had been inferred earlier. One implicature serves as context to derive another one. The interpretation of Denver's initial question has been stored in memory and now it is immediately recovered in order to understand what Paul D means. She must step back to the beginning of the conversation and bring back the working out of the child's first implicature in order to recover a fully adequate context that allows her to decode what is behind Paul D's words. The implicit meaning contained in his question would be as follows: *"will you ask me to leave as well?"*

Returning to the beginning of the text let us give some thought and confine a little bit of attention to the words *"make tracks"*. The utterance *"maybe I should make tracks"* means *"To leave home"*. In the second case (*"you make tracks"*), we are dealing with a different context, the context of a mother telling off her child. When addressed to Denver these words simply mean *"Leave the room"*, as it is made clear by means of the explicature *"go somewhere and sit down"*. Sethe is simply trying to lose sight of her daughter for a while. In both cases, *"make tracks"* has the same propositional content, but these utterances clearly differ in their contextual meanings.

In general, the pragmatic approach to text lets us conclude that the distinction between different types of illocutionary acts cannot be drawn sharply. We need to resort to context to disambiguate one illocutionary act from another. Different speech acts overlap with the same sentence type. Such blurring of boundaries between illocutionary acts and sentences has been made obvious in Morrison's *Beloved*. An interrogative sentence is not typically used to make a statement. It can be used to issue a request, a threat, a complaint and the like. There are no clear-cut boundaries between sentence types and illocutionary acts. The three common syntactic structures declarative, interrogative and imperative are not enough to account for the wide range of illocutionary acts and intentions behind a speaker's words.

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