2

Sociopragmatics
Roots and Definition

Jonathan Culpeper

2.1 Introduction

What one thinks sociopragmatics is depends on what one thinks pragmatics is. There are, of course, multifarious views on what constitutes the latter. As a starting point, Section 2.2 airs some of these views and considers where sociopragmatics might sit within them. The foundations of sociopragmatics, as it is usually understood today, are usually deemed to be in the work of Geoffrey N. Leech (e.g. 1983) and Jenny Thomas (e.g. 1981, 1983). This chapter does not deviate from this view. However, it is intriguing to consider whether there might be elements associated with sociopragmatics in foundational pragmatics works. Consequently, Section 2.3, on the foundations of sociopragmatics, begins with a glance at J. L. Austin’s ([1962] 1975) work on speech acts. The bulk of that section is devoted to the important distinction made between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. It also notes how that distinction has been adopted as a useful approach in certain sub-fields of pragmatics, including cross-cultural pragmatics, inter-cultural pragmatics and variational pragmatics. Finally, Section 2.4 focuses on context. Leech (1983: 10) states that sociopragmatics deals with ‘more specific “local” conditions on language use’. This is an important defining feature of sociopragmatics. But it is inadequately specified – how specific is specific? How local is local? Section 2.4 airs some of the issues and argues that the key level of context for sociopragmatics is somewhere in the middle of the micro–macro continuum.

2.2 Positioning Sociopragmatics in Pragmatics

One well-worn way of viewing pragmatics is in terms of the Continental European view and the Anglo-American view. These geographical labels perhaps give some vague indication of where practitioners of these views
are located, but disguise the variety of views held within those locations and have nothing to say about some large swaths of the world that are ‘big’ in pragmatics, Japan being a particular case in point, yet are neither in Continental Europe, the United Kingdom or the United States. It is better, in my view, to label these the ‘broad view’ and the ‘narrow view’. In the former, pragmatics is conceived as the huge superordinate field, with linguistics a sub-field, along with psychology, sociology and so on. The biennial conferences organized by the International Pragmatics Association reflect the diversity of the broad view. As Verschueren (1999: 7) puts it, pragmatics is a ‘general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour’. Note the incorporation of the word ‘social’. The key point is that if pragmatics itself is already social, then sociopragmatics, one might argue, is redundant. Much the same could be said of Jacob Mey’s (1998: 724) description of pragmatics in the Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics, where pragmatics is ‘societally oriented and societally bound linguistics’. However, in 2010 Mey established the journal Pragmatics and Society. How are the contents of this journal distinguished from pragmatics in general? The scope statement states:

Pragmatics and Society puts the spotlight on societal aspects of language use, while incorporating many other facets of society-oriented pragmatic studies…. It is concerned with how language use and social normativity influence and shape each other, for instance, in education (the teaching and acquisition of first and second languages), in political discourse (with its manipulative language use), in the discourse of business, and in all kinds of discriminatory uses of language (gender- and class-based or other) (https://benjamins.com/catalog/ps).

Despite his earlier statement, ‘society-oriented pragmatic studies’, or societal pragmatics, seems to be distinguished as a sub-group in broader (social) pragmatics by its emphasis on relatively macro social issues, societal practices and values, institutionalized and hegemonic discourses and so on. As Mey (2012: 2) states:

while ‘pragmatics is defined as the study of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society’ (Mey, 2001: 6), societal pragmatics emphasizes the social conditions under which we live and use language, and tries to determine in what specific ways these conditions respectively facilitate or obstruct, indeed, ‘make and break’, our use of language.

Societal pragmatics is also distinguished by a critical agenda: ‘Societal pragmatics sees it as its primary task to “unmask” manipulative use of language’ (Mey, 2012: 3). One might wonder: should sociopragmatics be accommodated somewhere on this ‘pragmatics to social’ dimension? If so, should it be towards the more macro end? Where would the boundary be?
Is it in fact synonymous with societal pragmatics? This issue will be further aired later in this chapter.

A way of approaching the narrow view of pragmatics is to consider Charles Morris’ (1938: 6–7) three-way semiotic distinction:

- Syntax (or syntactics) = mono relationship (relationships between linguistic signs)
- Semantics = dyadic relationship (relationships between linguistic signs and the things in the world that they designate)
- Pragmatics = triadic relationship (relationships between linguistic signs, things they designate, and their users/interpreters)

Morris’ pragmatics incorporates the same components as syntax and semantics, but in addition connects with users and interpreters – it connects with context. So, pragmatics in this view is a component within a theory of language. This view of pragmatics is exemplified by the papers in Horn and Ward’s (2004) *Handbook of Pragmatics*. As one might imagine, the focus is on more formal, philosophical and cognitive aspects. The discussion is of reference, deixis, (in)definiteness, information structure, implicature and inferencing, presupposition, formal aspects of speech act theory, and so on. Context is generally restricted to references to the ‘user’ or the ‘interpreter’, their purported intentions, inferential paths and so on. It is most certainly micro in focus. Does this view of pragmatics accommodate sociopragmatics? In their introduction, Horn and Ward (2004: xi) state that they ‘largely restricted’ their coverage of pragmatics to this narrow view. Despite the length of the volume – 842 pages – sociopragmatics is not mentioned in the index. It is perhaps too ‘socio’, too macro, to be accommodated.

Thus far, it seems difficult to find the pragmatic space that sociopragmatics inhabits. Part of the problem is that dichotomies such as continental European versus Anglo-American or micro versus macro are not particularly helpful. They are not, of course, the only ways of viewing pragmatics. Culpeper and Haugh (2014) set out to map a middle ground, referring to it as ‘integrative pragmatics’. It is characterized by engagement with data (both informing and being informed by data), and a particular focus on interaction (a focus that is partly inspired by Clark 1996 and Thomas 1995). It incorporates both user (first-order) and observer (second-order) perspectives, thus allowing a holistic approach. For example, it could highlight a micro conventionalized formula, but equally how a specific meaning potential emerged in interaction. Slightly more recently, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) articulated a ‘pragmatic-discursive approach’, which has some similarities to integrative pragmatics. Integrative pragmatics, and pragmatic-discursive pragmatics for that matter, were not designed with sociopragmatics in mind. Nevertheless, as will become clear in the following sections, sociopragmatics could be a happy sibling in the middle ground of pragmatics.
2.3 Sociopragmatics: Foundations

2.3.1 Austin: A Precursor?

The rather thin treatment of J. L. Austin’s ([1962] 1975) work on speech acts in Horn and Ward (2004) – a few sections in a couple of chapters – might hint at work that is too social for the micro-pragmatics agenda. His focus was on the ‘circumstances’ of a particular occasion of use. This is very much part of his notion of felicities, circumstances that must be in place for a speech act to be ‘happy’. For example, if I said ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ to a random couple on a UK bus, it will fail to have any effect (aside from them thinking I was mad!), because I am not empowered as a priest or registrar to perform a marriage, the context is not appropriate, and so on. This focus on a particular occasion of use is typical of sociopragmatics. Austin (1975: 8, original emphasis) writes:

Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, always, appropriate, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering further words.

Interestingly, as sociopragmatics developed, the idea of being appropriate became associated with sociopragmatics (see Section 2.3.2). Note also in the quotation that Austin accommodates ‘other actions . . . uttering further words’. This is very different from John Searle’s (e.g. 1969) approach to speech act theory, with its theorizing about single speech acts. For Austin, constellations of actions are at the heart of sociopragmatics. Furthermore, Austin factors in social concepts throughout. Consider two brief examples from Austin (1975:28):

‘I pick’ is only in order when the object of the verb is ‘a player’, and a command is in order only when the subject of the verb is ‘a commander’ or ‘an authority’.

Picking involves selecting players for a team and illustrates a mapping between the performative and a role in a particular activity; commanding illustrates a mapping between a speech act and a social role with power. Roles, activities, social dimensions, such things are the stuff of sociopragmatics.

Before leaving Austin, it is worth using his words to help clarify why we are talking about sociopragmatics and not sociolinguistics.

for a procedure to be accepted involves more than for it merely to be the case that it is in fact generally used, even actually by the persons now concerned; and that it must remain in principle open for anyone to reject any procedure – or code of procedures – even one that he has already hitherto accepted – as may happen with, for example, the code of honour. One who does so is, of course, liable to sanctions; others refuse to play with him or say that he is not a man of honour. (Austin 1975: 29; original emphasis)
Austin is discussing a number of things here. One is the difference between acceptability as a morally sanctioned ‘ought’ (a code of honour is a set of social oughts sustained by a particular community) and regularity of experience (norms of habit) (for further discussion of this, see Culpeper 2011: 33–6). But what I wish to focus on is the possibility of rejecting a procedure. We have a choice, and, having made one choice, we can change to another if we wish. These possibilities allow us to generate pragmatic meanings. In Austin’s example, choosing the code of honour and then rejecting it can lead to an interpretation that the person merits sanctions – refusal to engage (‘to play with him’), negative identity attributions (‘he is not a man of honour’), and so on.

Thomas (1995: 185, original emphasis) makes a parallel point when elaborating on what she sees as the demarcation between sociolinguistics and pragmatics:

we could say that sociolinguistics is mainly concerned with the systematic linguistic correlates of relatively fixed and stable social variables (such as region of origin, social class, ethnicity, sex, age) on the way an individual speaks. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with describing the linguistic correlates of relatively changeable features of that same individual (such as relative status, social role) and the way in which the speaker exploits his/her (socio)linguistic repertoire in order to achieve a particular goal.

Sociolinguistics is static, offering a ‘snapshot’ of the language of a particular community at a particular moment in time. Pragmatics is dynamic, describing what a speaker from that community does with those resources, how he or she uses them to change the way things are or in order to maintain the status quo. Pragmatics is parasitic upon sociolinguistics, taking the sociolinguistic description of an individual’s repertoire as a point of departure: sociolinguistics tells us what linguistic resources the individual has, pragmatics tells us what he or she does with it.

Of course, one should remember here that Thomas’ work was published in 1995, bringing together research generated in the 1980s, and both fields have developed so that they are closer than they used to be (for a recent discussion of the sociolinguistics-pragmatics interface, see Holmes 2018). Some branches of sociolinguistics, and indeed pragmatics, have changed in response to the development of social constructionist approaches (notably to gender; see e.g. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003) and discursive approaches (notably pioneered in discursive psychology; see e.g. Edwards and Potter 1992). These branches most certainly view language as dynamic; it is their sine qua non. Nevertheless, the point is true of much of traditional sociolinguistics, and in particular sociolinguistics of the Labovian kind. It is also true that much of pragmatics focuses on dynamic matters – the way in which meanings shift in tandem with
shifts in context, including the ebb and flow of conversation – though not all areas of pragmatics do to the same degree, some areas of formal pragmatics being less dynamic in this sense.

2.3.2 Sociopragmatics and Pragmalinguistics

As Marmaridou (2011) elaborates, the term pragmalinguistics seems to have been used since at least the 1970s for functional aspects of language use. It was not, however, positioned in contrast to sociopragmatics – an important definitional development – until we arrive at the work of Geoffrey N. Leech and Jenny Thomas. Thomas (1981: 13) attributes the notion of ‘sociopragmatics’ to ‘Leech (1981)’. That is, in fact, a prepublication draft of Leech (1983). In turn, Geoffrey Leech (1983: 18n13) attributes the distinction between ‘pragmalinguistics’ and ‘sociopragmatics’ to Thomas (1981), an MA thesis supervised by Leech. That attribution could have been an act of generosity and modesty on his part. The detail of who did what is lost in the jointly constructed discourses of supervisor and supervisee. Where Leech has a clearer role is in also positioning pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in the field of pragmatics.

Leech (1983: 11) makes the following three-way distinctions:

- **General pragmatics**: ‘the general conditions of the communicative use of language’;
- **Sociopragmatics**:1 ‘more specific “local” conditions on language use’; and
- **Pragmalinguistics**: ‘the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions’.

These areas are arranged in a diagram (Leech 1983: 11), showing the relationships amongst them. This is reproduced in Figure 2.1, with the addition of ‘philosophy’ and ‘cognitive science’ at the top of the diagram.

Note that pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics are separate from general pragmatics, which is distinguished from the latter by the fact that it ‘exclude[s] more specific “local” conditions on language use’ (1983: 10). An important issue here is what exactly constitutes ‘“local” conditions’. We will return to this in Section 2.3.3. Regarding sociopragmatics, Leech (1983: 10) states,

> It is clear that the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle operate variably in different cultures or language communities, in different social situations, among different social classes, etc. . . . pragmatic descriptions ultimately have to be relative to specific social conditions. In other words, socio-pragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics.

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1 In his 1983 book, Leech writes ‘socio-pragmatics’ with a hyphen. In more recent years, it is generally solid.
More recently, Leech (2014: 14), in reference to the pragmatics of politeness, describes sociopragmatics as involving ‘the various scales of value that make a particular degree of politeness seem appropriate or normal in a given social setting’. Note the idea of being deemed appropriate. Leech’s earlier statement referring to ‘language use’ (Leech 1983: 10) reflects the pragmatics of that time, which was very much concerned with a speaker-oriented view of pragmatics, that is to say, the speaker making choices in their use of language. In this more recent quotation, we clearly are dealing with understanding and evaluation, things that the hearer does. Leech is not, of course, rejecting his earlier view of sociopragmatics, but rather discussing sociopragmatics in the context of politeness. Nevertheless, the fact that he is now doing this demonstrates that he is attuned to shifts in pragmatics that have reduced the ascendancy of the speaker in the processes of making meaning. Pragmalinguistics, on the other hand, concerns ‘such phenomena as the range of the lexico-grammatical resources of the language, their meanings, the degree of pragmaticalization, their frequency, and how they are deployed as linguistic strategies of politeness’ (Leech 2014: 14).

General pragmatics relates to the ‘general conditions of the communicative use of language’ (Leech 1983: 10), and, I would argue, concerns the more philosophical or cognitive sides of pragmatics. The three areas together are viewed by Leech as complementary areas of study within pragmatics as a whole. Of course, just as noted with Thomas (1995) at the end of the previous section, the academic world has changed since the early 1980s. For instance, the field of social cognition, interfacing with cognitive science and sociology, has grown significantly in strength, and can provide input into sociopragmatics (see Chapter 28).

The concepts of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics are explored in Thomas’ early work dealing with ‘pragmatic failure’ in the context of cross-cultural pragmatics. According to her:
while pragmalinguistic failure is basically a *linguistic* problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. *(Thomas 1983: 99)*

Two points are noteworthy here. One is that sociopragmatics is identified with cultures rather than Leech’s “local” conditions. I shall discuss both views on the key aspects of context for sociopragmatics in the following section. The other is that the notion of sociopragmatics is seen as a means of identifying (in)appropriate linguistic behaviour. Thomas’ work did much to propel sociopragmatics into the fields of cross-cultural pragmatics and inter-language pragmatics. Moreover, in those fields we often find studies investigating what is sociopragmatically appropriate.

Thomas (1983: 104) claims that sociopragmatic issues are ‘social before they are linguistic’; and presumably pragmalinguistic issues are linguistic before they are social. However, she states that there is no ‘absolute distinction’ between them – ‘they form a continuum and there is certainly a grey area in the middle’ *(Thomas 1981: 49)*. Minimally, Thomas (1981: 50) claims that they are a ‘useful heuristic’. Marmaridou (2011: 84) notes that Leech’s principles of general pragmatics are to be held constant and form the basis, or the ground, against which all other language-and culture-specific pragmatic variables can be studied as distinct figures. This position lends itself to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons of communicative behaviour with obvious applications for language teaching/learning and testing. Moreover, the distinction proposed within this framework seems compatible with the aims and methods of the study of discourse and historical pragmatics in particular.

The areas of second language pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics, and also historical pragmatics, have indeed seen many studies deploy the pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic distinction (see Chapters 32, 34 and 35). To these areas, we should also add that of variational pragmatics (see Chapter 31). However, it cannot be said that it is a straightforward distinction to make as a methodological approach, even when operating at the apparent extremes of the continuum. Marmaridou (2011: 93–4) elaborates on the difficulty of diagnosing whether a particular area is due to pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic issues:

If politeness markers are missing from an utterance, this could be either because the learner does not know these markers, or because she is not aware that these markers should be used in the particular situation. The former indicates pragmalinguistic, whereas the latter sociopragmatic, inadequacy. Therefore, it is difficult to devise a test that would assess pragmalinguistic knowledge to the exclusion of sociopragmatic knowledge, or the reverse. The problem seems more acute when testing
pragmatic strategies, such as indirectness. While the linguistic expressions used to encode indirectness belong to the pragmalinguistic level, the social target to which they are addressed is a sociopragmatic matter.

2.3.3 Sociopragmatics and Context

As already mentioned, Leech (1983: 10) stated that sociopragmatics deals with ‘more specific “local” conditions on language use’. ‘Specific’ here obviously contrasts with the ‘general’ of general pragmatics. This is of some help in delimiting sociopragmatics. However, it is important to understand it as meaning a specific occasion of use and not just the one-off specifics of an occasion. A social constructionist or discursive approach might focus on the specifics of an occasion, and how they together construct particular potential for meanings. A sociopragmatic approach might do that too, but would not shy away from encompassing the more general elements that are deployed. Janet Holmes has made this point in a number of publications. She notes that ‘the patterns, generalizations, and norms of speech usage which emerge from quantitative analyses provide a crucial framework which informs and illuminates the way in which individual speakers use language’ (Holmes 1998: 325). Writing about the sociopragmatic analysis of politeness, Holmes and Schnurr (2005: 122) comment:

Attention to context, to the community of practice in which people are participating . . . , awareness of the dynamic and negotiated nature of interaction, and of the constantly shifting assessments participants make when engaged in talk – these are all considerations which have improved the quality of the socio-pragmatic analysis of politeness . . .

But there is also a place for generalisation, and for the identification of patterns in linguistic behaviour.

Indeed. Pragmatics is partly about conventions and norms, which can be exploited to generate meanings, and sociopragmatics is no different. All this, one might note, is in tune with a kind of middle-ground pragmatics, as outlined at the end of Section 2.2.

But what of ‘local’? ‘Local’ is a relative notion – how local is local? Here, we return to the micro–macro dimension aired in Section 2.2. Hoye (2006: 25), discussing applications of pragmatics, refers to the micro–macro distinction:

‘Micro-pragmatics’ looks at the day-to-day context of communication between individuals and groups situated in their local contexts. At the same time, local practices need to be seen against the societal backgrounds and institutional settings in which they occur (i.e. ‘macro-pragmatics’).
Thus, micro-pragmatics is aligned with the local. However, recollect that sociopragmatics is not accommodated within the kind of micro-pragmatics practised in Horn and Ward (2004). Moreover, Hoye (2006: 25) goes on to attribute a particularly narrow remit to the micro and the local:

With its focus on the sentence/utterance level of discourse, micro-pragmatics is concerned primarily with the local constraints of the immediate context, such as: deixis and the indexing of personal, temporal, and locative features; reference and the textually directed function of anaphora and cataphora; and word order and the sequencing/clustering of particles and their discourse function to modify illocutionary force, to facilitate the management of conversation or to highlight salient parts in a stretch of discourse.

This is certainly narrower than Leech or Thomas would envisage. For example, they would include issues of politeness within sociopragmatics, as indeed Leech (1983) did with his Politeness Principle, but that is not accommodated within the vision of micro-pragmatics articulated immediately above, or for that matter in Horn and Ward (2004).

Thomas’ decision to place ‘culture’ at the heart of the definition of sociopragmatics, and without elaboration, is no less problematic. Is culture a macro contextual notion? It could be. But in fact culture is variable in terms of level of abstraction. Popular cultural labels concern hemispheres (i.e. Eastern/Western), nations, institutions, social groups (e.g. working class), and so on. Moreover, the notion of culture itself offers a definitional nightmare. Cultures are multiple and constantly undergoing change, and people shift in and out of particular cultures (see e.g. Wright 1998; Gudykunst and Kim 2003); they are not reducible to a relatively short list of stable features passed on from generation to generation – something that would reflect an essentialist view.

In my view, some of the above problems can be eased by taking the view that sociopragmatics is most at home in the medial or meso level of context. Various language scholars have suggested three levels of context. For example, Dittmar (1997: 99–100) posits that sociolinguistics falls into ‘social dialectology’ (i.e. ‘variationist sociolinguistics’), ‘interactional sociolinguistics’ and the ‘sociology of language’. Halliday makes a three-way distinction: ‘text’, ‘context of situation’ and ‘context of culture’ (see e.g. Halliday and Hasan, 1989: 44–7). Fairclough (1992: chapter 3), discussing Critical Discourse Analysis, elaborates a ‘three-dimensional conception of discourse’, comprising ‘text’ (formal linguistic features), ‘discursive practice’ (a type of social practice involving the production and interpretation of texts) and ‘social practice’ (actions relating to social structures, e.g. ideologies, institutions, power relations). From scholars who would think of themselves as contributing to pragmatics, we should mention Levinson (1995) and also Terkourafi (e.g. 2005a). Levinson (1995) proposes three levels or layers of meaning. In between the traditional distinction coded meaning and speaker meaning, he suggests
there is utterance-type meaning, that is, stereotypical meaning based on ‘general expectations about how language is normally used’ (93). The background to this proposal lies in Grice’s (1989) distinction between particularized and generalized implicatures. Particularized implicatures are nonce inferences worked out from scratch on the basis of the particular context the utterance appears in; generalized implicatures have a more stable association with particular linguistic forms (cf. Grice 1989: 37). Levinson’s contribution was to characterize generalized implicatures as the level of meaning between particularized implicatures and fully conventionalized (non-defeasible) implicatures. One might wonder what all this has to do with sociopragmatics. An early trace of the idea of a third level of meaning can be found in Levinson’s work on activity types (examples of which include an interview, lecture, trial, service encounter, chat), a contextual notion that is very much a meso level. According to Levinson (1992: 970), understanding what activity type is involved will ‘help to determine how what one says will be “taken” – that is, what kinds of inferences will be made from what is said.’ (See also Mooney 2004: 903–5 for a discussion of how activity types can contextualize the workings of the Cooperative Principle.) However, it was Terkourafi (e.g. 2005a) who forged a clear connection with central sociopragmatic concerns, notably, politeness.

Terkourafi (e.g. 2005a) split generalized implicatures into two according to their relationship with context. One sub-category involves implicatures that are weakly context-dependent, requiring a minimal amount of contextual information relating to the social context of use in which the utterance was conventionalized to some degree; the other, as described by Levinson, involves implicatures that are even more weakly context-dependent – their meaning is presumed in a variety of contexts. This gives us the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particularized</th>
<th>Generalized I</th>
<th>Generalized II</th>
<th>Coded</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(utterance-token meaning derived in nonce context)</td>
<td>(utterance-type meaning presumed in minimal context)</td>
<td>(utterance-type meaning presumed in all contexts ceteris paribus)</td>
<td>(sentence meaning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Terkourafi argues that, whilst politeness can involve full inferencing in a nonce context, as leading works on politeness argue (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987), what lies at its heart is a generalized implicature of the first type given above. Her argument is neatly summarized here (Terkourafi 2005b: 251, original emphasis):

Politeness is achieved on the basis of a generalised implicature when an expression x is uttered in a context with which – based on the addressee’s previous experience of similar contexts – expression x regularly co-occurs. In this case, rather than engaging in full-blown inferencing about the speaker’s intention, the addressee draws on that
previous experience (represented holistically as a frame) to derive the proposition that “in uttering expression x the speaker is being polite” as a generalised implicature of the speaker’s utterance. On the basis of this generalised implicature, the addressee may then come to hold the further belief that the speaker is polite.

In all these cases, I would argue that it is the middle area involving the medial or meso level of context that is closest to sociopragmatics. Table 2.1 presents one way of conceiving of different degrees of contextual abstraction in pragmatic description.

Needless to say, these levels do not exist in isolation but interact with other levels. Cultures, for example, interact with activity types, which interact with particular speech acts, which in turn interact with particular linguistic forms; in other words, as already noted, there is a sense in which cultures are present at all levels. It is the contextual level represented by activities that is the middle or meso level that is so important for sociopragmatics, not least of all because it acts as a bridge between the micro and the macro. As Linell and Thunqvist (2003: 431), writing about activity types, argue: ‘it can be seen as a meso-level concept in providing a link between the micro and macro levels of sociological description, thus working against micro–macro dualism’ (cf. Layder 1994). In my view, sociopragmatics should primarily, though not exclusively, concern itself with the medial level of context (or aspects that compose it). It links more micro, linguistically oriented considerations (the typical focus of pragmalinguistics) and more macro, sociologically oriented considerations (the typical focus of, for example, Critical Discourse Studies). The argument about levels and sociopragmatics here is broadly in tune with Holmes’ (2018: 28) positioning of sociopragmatics:

sociopragmatics productively explores the relationship between macro-level sociolinguistics concerns and micro-level interactional sociolinguistic concerns, providing a myriad of new insights into the ways in which individuals are constantly negotiating complex social identities in everyday face-to-face interaction.

Table 2.1 *Levels of context in pragmatic description*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of context</th>
<th>Descriptive focus</th>
<th>Associated descriptive concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Sociocultural phenomena across interactions</td>
<td>E.g. ideologies, cultures, nationalities, genders, ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meso</td>
<td>Situated interaction</td>
<td>E.g. activity types, frames, genres, discourses, social practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro</td>
<td>Use and interpretation of specific forms</td>
<td>E.g. speech acts, discursive practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Linguistic form</td>
<td>E.g. modal verb, interrogative structure, rising intonation, vowel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Developed from Culpeper et al. (2008: 320).
2.4 Conclusion

In this brief conclusion, I bring together some of the elements discussed in this chapter to propose a possible definition of sociopragmatics:\(^2\)

Sociopragmatics is positioned on the more social side of pragmatics, standing in contrast to the more linguistic side. It is focussed on the construction and understanding of meanings arising from interactions between language (or other semiotic resources) and socio-cultural phenomena. It is centrally concerned with situated interaction, especially local, meso-level contexts (e.g. frames, activity types, genres). It often considers norms emerging in such contexts, how they are exploited by participants, and how they lead to evaluations of (in)appropriateness.

This is not intended as a radical departure from the original statements of scholars like Leech and Thomas, but instead largely an updating in the light of developments since they wrote. Moreover, it is not intended as a prescriptive definition.

This definition avoids two pitfalls in current understandings of sociopragmatics. It avoids the excessively broad understanding in which sociopragmatics becomes very difficult to distinguish from pragmatics generally, especially if we accept that all pragmatics has a social aspect. It also avoids the broad understanding in which sociopragmatics becomes aligned with macro sociocultural units and takes on a critical agenda (an understanding that would make it difficult to distinguish from Critical Discourse Studies). The phenomena falling under the sociopragmatics espoused in this chapter are not restricted to one method of study. In fact, multi-method studies would provide a more complete picture. For example, corpus methods, adapted for local meso level contexts, could tease out norms; qualitative analyses could describe exploitations of norms; analyses of metalanguage could reveal evaluations of appropriateness; and so on.

References


\(^2\) I proposed a definition of sociopragmatics in Culpeper (2010). This is compatible with what I said there but considerably expanded.


