

An Introduction to Pragmatics

(1) Pragmatic Missteps

Consider the following situations.

(A)

A friend borrowed your computer and accidentally spilled coffee on it. She says: "Oh sorry, hope nothing is ruined."

How would you feel? Is this an adequate apology? Why or why not?

(B)

You invite a friend to a party. He says: "Sorry, I can't."

How does this make you feel? What is the message? Is there something else you would expect him to say?

Pragmatics refers to the ways in which people express and interpret the meaning of others. In order to improve communication, we can learn skills to recognize situations and elements that are related to pragmatic behaviors and modify what we say and how we say it. The two situations above are examples of scenarios in which pragmatic miscommunication might have occurred.

(2) What can I do to help avoid miscommunication?

Pragmatic missteps can occur for many reasons. Some key elements include:

The relationship you have with someone. Is it formal? Informal? Close? Distant?

For example, how might a greeting vary if you are talking with a friend as compared to a professor?

The situation and context. If you make a comment, will someone interpret that as a request? Does this count as an apology? Is it even culturally appropriate to make a request in this case?

For example, when is it appropriate to ask to borrow money? Who can you borrow money from? How much is too much money?

The level of directness. How direct do I need to be? If I am too direct will it be seen as rude? If I am too indirect, will I be interpreted as manipulative?

For example, you forget a friend's birthday. Is it more important to be direct and honest or to give various reasons why you forgot?