Affiliation
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China
email: 1286612296@qq.com

Review

Pragmatics: The Basics
Billy Clark (2022)
Routledge Press

Reviewed by Zhiyin Yu

Most of the time, when people first approach pragmatics, they tend to feel intimidated and frustrated by extensive and elaborate discussions of theories accompanied by unintelligible technical jargon. That is where Pragmatics: The Basics really comes in handy. Written by Billy Clark, this book is highly accessible and beginner-friendly, providing an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format as the author has deliberately kept technical terms to a minimum, although some remain inevitable.

In the preface, the author shares the interesting observation that the word “basic” has developed some negative connotations nowadays, and marks a change concerning linguistic semantics. He contends that, unlike semantics, pragmatics focuses on how we work out which meaning is intended when words are uttered in a specific situation (p. 17).

Just as a single word can be understood differently by different people, pragmatics can be defined differently by different linguists. For instance, pragmatics can be labelled as “the field of linguistics that studies meaning in context” (Birner, 2021, p. 1), while Lakoff simply interprets it as “the interesting stuff about language” (Lakoff, 1993, p. 367). In this book, the author defines pragmatics as how
we communicate and understand each other and he also claims that pragmatics aims to develop accounts of how we decide which words to use and what other things to do while communicating, of how we work out what someone intends to communicate by what they say and do, and of how meanings emerge and are adjusted during interaction (p. 17).

The main body of the book is composed of nine chapters that cover the development history of pragmatics, existing theories, the application of pragmatics and possible future developments in this field. Each of the nine chapters has the same structure. The main discussion, divided into subsections, is preceded by an overview of the chapter, sometimes along with a brief recap of the previous chapters and followed by practical suggestions for things to do to “Find Out More” and some recommended Further Reading, which enables students to expand their knowledge on topics in which they are interested. This organisation, together with the palatable style, guarantees the clarity and accessibility of the presentation.

The book opens with an introduction, which is divided into two sections, where the author discusses what exactly pragmatics is and what pragmatic theories have attempted to explain, respectively. According to the author, pragmatics aims to account for how we produce and understand acts of verbal and nonverbal communication (p. 21). What is more, to offer the readers a glimpse of what pragmatics aims to do, one funny, simple dialogue is used throughout the whole chapter in which the author touches on what the speaker is communicating directly or indirectly, how literal the speaker is being, whether the speaker is being metaphorical or ironic, etc., and all of these pave the way for further detailed explanation in the later chapters.

In Chapter 2, the author concentrates on the influential ideas proposed by Paul Grice, one of the most prominent figures in pragmatics. Grice proposed a significant and influential distinction between “natural meaning” and “non-natural meaning”. According to Grice, communication is cooperative behaviour, involving the shared goal of getting communication to happen. To account for this, he proposed a general and overarching cooperative principle and a number of more specific “maxims of conversation” which are subsumed within it. The four maxims in question are rational principles that can govern communication and can explain how people understand each other in context. Another key part of Grice’s account is the distinction between saying and implicating and the three types of implicature that he formulated, namely conventional implicature, generalised conversational implicature and particularised conversational implicature. As for what gives rise to implicatures, Grice identified three cases: cases where no maxim is violated, cases where maxims “clash”, and cases where the speaker flouts the maxims. Finally, Clark, the author, also touches on some cases of violating
maxims without causing implicature discussed by Grice and some other linguists, including “unostentatious” violations, unintended violations and “suspension” of maxims.

The next three chapters look at approaches developed that build on Grice’s great contributions. Chapter 3 discusses two approaches developed by Laurence Horn and Stephen Levinson which propose a smaller number of principles and one approach developed by Geoffrey Leech which proposes a greater number, all of which are referred to as “Neo-Gricean” in that they all retain the idea that the general principles are maxim-like principles which people aim to follow in verbal interactions. Prior to introducing the three great approaches, the author elaborates on problems lying within Grice’s Principle: the maxims of quantity and relation seem to overlap in some cases while the maxims of quality and manner do not seem as central to pragmatics as the maxims of quantity and relation. In response to the problem, Horn proposed two principles, Q Principle and R Principle, which subsume Grice’s maxims and are both simpler and more coherent than Grice’s account. Similarly, Levinson put forward three principles, each of which has a speaker’s maxim and a hearer’s “corollary”: Q-Principle, I-Principle and M-Principle. The final approach considered in this chapter was developed by Leech, who suggested that the maxims needed to fall under an overarching politeness principle which operated alongside Grice’s cooperative principle. Overall, the politeness principle, which governs a set of maxims proposed by Leech, is an additional principle to cooperative principle.

While the previous chapter focuses on “Neo-Gricean” pragmatic theories which suggest a variety of maxim-like pragmatic principles, chapter 4 looks at the “Post Gricean” approach, relevance theory, where principles are viewed as generalisations about cognition and communication rather than maxims. The author begins this chapter by stating the central idea behind relevance theory: whenever somebody makes clear to somebody else that they are intentionally communicating with them, this creates the expectation that the communicator must have in mind an interpretation which will justify the effort involved in arriving at that interpretation (p. 72). Afterwards, the author comes up with a technical definition of relevance by putting different pragmaticists’ ideas together: i) the more effects something has, the more relevant it is; ii) the more effort involved in interpreting something, the less relevant it is. The chapter goes on to shed some light on the cognitive principle of relevance as well as the communicative principle of relevance before discussing the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic in detail. To be more specific, cognitive principle states that human cognition is geared towards the maximisation of relevance (p. 76). The communicative principle of relevance states that every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (p. 78) and the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic
means to test interpretive hypotheses in order of accessibility and to stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (p. 80). The author also provides a basic introduction to different types of explicatures and implicatures and how relevance theory rules out certain possible interpretations of utterances.

Chapter 5, “Managing interaction – (im)politeness interaction”, shifts the focus to how we manage social relationships in interaction and, more specifically, to how utterances can be more or less polite. In the first section of this chapter, the author puts forward a couple of dialogues as examples to illustrate what counts as being polite or impolite in verbal interactions in various cultural contexts. In the second section of this chapter, the author introduces Brown and Levinson’s (1987) approach to politeness as well as some other essential notions, comprising the distinction between positive face and negative face, face-threatening acts and some politeness strategies. The author then draws on the examples mentioned in the previous chapters in order to underscore the ubiquity of both politeness and impoliteness in our day-to-day life. This chapter closes with the introduction of three “waves” of (im)politeness theories, with the author pointing out that there has also been an increased tendency to consider how (im)politeness relates to other aspects of social interaction such as the construction of identity, impression and rapport management, cross-cultural variation and intercultural communication (p. 109).

In chapter 6, “What words can do – speech acts”, what are brought into focus and analysed are the ideas of John L. Austin, who worked alongside Grice at Oxford in the mid-20th century. This chapter begins with a brief summary of Austin’s analysis of speech acts before focusing on how to make distinctions among speech acts and the main properties of a speech act, of which the most important for pragmatics, and the most discussed in work on linguistic semantics and pragmatics are locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In the following sections, the author makes a clear analysis of how different kinds of speech acts fit within a distinction between semantics (linguistic meaning) and pragmatics (contextually inferred meaning) and the problems that remain unsolved in this respect, and, finally, how those concepts can be applied in understanding communicative acts. The most significant notion throughout the chapter is that utterances perform action, that is, when we speak we are actually doing something.

The next two chapters both go beyond and tackle how things other than words affect what is communicated, sometimes accompanying words and sometimes in purely nonverbal communication. Chapter 7, “Beyond words: prosody”, basically consists of two sections, presenting the way communication is affected by prosody, which includes pitch level and movement, volume, stress, rhythm, and voice quality, all of which are not exactly linguistic but can affect how utterances sound. In the former section, the author discusses how stress placement and intonation
affect how we convey particular meanings or interpret particular utterances in conversation in particular. In the latter section, the author deconstructs the functions of even more features of prosody. For me, the most interesting part of this chapter is how prosodic boundaries can help disambiguate utterances which can be associated with more than one syntactic structure, which in a sense is a syntax-pragmatics interface. Overall, this chapter is engaging and educational. Unfortunately, the author can only scratch the surface for the sake of space and clarity.

Chapter 8 concentrates on nonverbal communication and multi-modal communication, respectively. At the end of the chapter, the author also points out that, “to explain a particular communicative act, then, we need to identify coded meanings of verbal and nonverbal forms and to account for how they interact in leading to an overall interpretation” (p. 161).

The last chapter of the book, “The future: developing theories”, begins with a reflection on where pragmatics has gone since Grice put forward his influential proposals towards the end of the 20th century. It then considers some potential future directions and concludes with suggestions for projects that readers might be interested in.

The main content of the book closes with a glossary that contains an alphabetical compilation of key terms which have been used in work on pragmatics. The glossary is directed to undergraduates with no prior knowledge of pragmatics who can resort to it in the early stage of their study.

In the book, the author mostly acts as a thoughtful guide who introduces us to the most relevant aspects of pragmatics, although he does not share much of his own views. The volume can familiarise readers with the names and major contributions of the pivotal figures in the field. What is more, the book draws on real-world examples such as literature and song lyrics in order to demonstrate how we convey and understand direct and indirect meanings in daily life. This makes its content way more intriguing and less of a chore. Moreover, in chapter 8, when elaborating on multi-modal communication, the author even employs some pictures in a newspaper as examples. In addition, the author deploys the simple and plain diction of everyday speech throughout the text and imparts knowledge in a conversational tone, and this makes the volume fairly reader-friendly. Hence, readers will surely find it rather easy to follow the author’s train of thought and grasp “the basics”. Another commendable thing about this book is its perfect print consistency, or the strict typographical conventions throughout the book. For instance, when the author refers to a linguistic expression he always writes it in italics (e.g. when discussing words such as “boot” and “trunk” or the complex phrase “a student with a spare copy of the textbook”). Furthermore, when the author needs to represent sounds, he uses symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), produced and updated by the International Phonetics
Association. He emphasises that, when transcribing sounds, there is always some idealisation involved, and the transcriber has to make decisions about how to represent particular sounds (p. 15). Last but not least, the author has thoughtfully provided lots of useful textbooks and other resources where readers can find out more information if interested.

All in all, Pragmatics: The Basics is highly recommendable to all the students out there who are interested in pragmatics and want to have a sense of the basics. It will certainly simplify their first steps in linguistic studies, laying a solid foundation for their further study.

References

