

[REVIEW]

## *Understanding Pragmatics*

By Gunter Senft, Routledge, New York, 2014, x+222pp.

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### 1. Introduction

Senft's book, *Understanding Pragmatics*, takes a transdisciplinary approach to providing a general and comprehensive introduction to pragmatics by discussing the major themes in the field via six relevant disciplines, namely, philosophy, psychology, ethology, ethnology, sociology, and the political sciences. Pragmatics, the discipline within linguistics that studies actual language use, is a transdiscipline that aims to research how context and convention contribute to meaning and understanding by interacting with other disciplines that share interest in human social (inter)action.

The book opens with an impressive anecdote dating back to the early 1980s and recounts the author's early experience in Trobriand, Papua New Guinea, where he started his field research. Every morning when he walked to a fresh water grotto to take a bath, villagers always asked him the same question, "*Ambe?*" meaning "Where (are you going to)?" After responding impatiently by either waving his towel or simply saying, "Oh, you know, I will go to the grotto like every day," he was informed by his neighbor that his answer was inadequate. He should have answered this question as truthfully and precisely as possible: "I will go, I will have a bath, I will return, I will stay in the village, I will work." The reason for

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this is a practical one; Trobriand Islanders are afraid of being hurt by sharp coral rocks or falling coconuts on the paths, getting lost in the jungle or being frightened by a *kosi*, the ghostly spirits of dead people. If people are not found at their planned locations, the villagers will look for them. Thus, the villagers' morning greeting showed their care and concern for Senft and indicated that he was viewed as one of the members of the community. The author's casual or impatient answer stemmed from his lack of knowledge of the culture-specific forms of the Trobriand Islanders' language use, including the rules and conventions with respect to how they use language in social interactions and what their words mean in certain contexts.

This eye-opening personal experience inspired the author to pursue the field of pragmatics. In fact, this anecdote plays a key role in this book; at the end of each chapter, the author raises the same question: what does this chapter tell us about the anecdote reported in the introduction? By answering this question, the author not only successfully demonstrates how this misunderstanding can be approached using different theories within pragmatics, but it also makes the book sufficiently exciting and attractive for readers to find themselves deeply involved in the author's passionate academic exploration.

Chapters 1 through 6, which follow the introduction, first explain the major theories in the various domains of pragmatics. These theories are then discussed from a cross-linguistic/cross-cultural perspective incorporating a variety of examples. In Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, a summary is followed by a brief outlook on a new movement in pragmatics, "emancipatory pragmatics."

Although this book refers to many important theories and influential studies, I will not go into them in detail here. Rather, I will summarize each chapter and then make a comment on the outlook stated at the end of the book.

## 2. Overview

Chapter 1 presents Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) version of speech act theory and Grice's (1967) theory of conversational implicature. These three philosophers' insights into how speakers generate specific meanings with language have had a strong impact on pragmatics. Austin regarded speech as action and classified speech acts into "locutions" and "illocutions," that is, speech acts which have meaning and speech acts which achieve certain effects, respectively. Austin's theory was systematized by

Searle, who saw speaking as performing “illocutionary acts” that have an effect on the hearer, and he analyzed them in terms of their constitutive rules. Grice’s theory of conversational implicature was based on his observation that there is a difference between what is said and what is implied by the speaker. He claimed that conversation is guided by a mutually shared system of expectations, what he called “conversational maxims” constituted of Quantity, Quality, Relations, and Manner.

Although these philosophical ideas of language were at first assumed to be universal in application, cross-cultural and anthropological studies have since shown that speech acts are highly culture-specific. For example, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project conducted by Blum-Kulka and her colleagues (1989) refuted the claim of universality by indicating that speech acts such as apology and request in seven languages are different with respect to directness and indirectness. Moreover, examinations of Grice’s theory in non-Indo-European languages, including the Trobriand Islanders’ language Kilivila (Senft (2008)), have shown that some languages regularly violate Gricean conversational maxims.

At the end of Chapter 1, Senft poses the question: what does this chapter tell us about his experience in Trobriand? For one thing, we now understand that the question *Ambe?* is a culturally-specific speech act complexly intertwined with a convention in Trobriand, not merely a speech act that requests information.

The second chapter, “Pragmatics and psychology: Deictic reference and gesture,” provides an introduction to the study of deixis, which analyzes how languages encode features in the context of utterances such as objects, persons, and places. The first part of the chapter outlines the general features of spatial deixis across different languages. Noteworthy is the typology of spatial systems established by the Space Project of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (e.g. Levinson (2003)). Based on how angles are projected from the “ground” in order to situate the location of the “figure” that is referred to, the typology defines three systems, “relative,” “absolute,” and “intrinsic” frames of reference. These three systems can be found in any given language, but it is likely that a language will show a preference for one of the three in particular.

The second part of the chapter deals with gestures that are used for pointing. Wundt’s (1900) pioneering work classified gesture types into “demonstrative,” “imitative,” “connotative,” and “symbolic” gestures according to their forms and functions, and claimed that there is a regularity that makes gestural communication perfect. Wundt’s idea was developed by

psychologists such as Kendon (2004) and McNeill (1992). They elaborated on the classification of gestures and revealed that speakers not only produce co-speech gestures, which are designed for addressees and used to communicate, but also co-thought gestures, which support the speakers' thinking in problem-solving situations. The ensuing discussions on this topic have revealed a strong interrelationship between language, gesture, and thought, as well as unveiling the fact that human interaction is multimodal.

In this chapter, the author recalls that he pointed to the direction in which the fresh water grotto was located when answering the question *Ambe?* We now know that this was a rather vague indicator because the Trobriand Islanders do not have an absolute system of spatial reference.

Chapter 3, "Pragmatics and human ethology: Biological foundations of communicative behavior," presents the ethological concept of expressive behavior in human communication. Succeeding the Darwinian perspective, Ekman and his colleagues' (e.g. Ekman and Friesen (1975)) claims that there are universal basic facial expressions that are labeled with the same emotion terms have since been widely refuted on ethnological, anthropological, and linguistic grounds. However, their study did contribute to the development of systems to describe expressive behavior such as facial expressions. Important research into facial expressions has revealed interesting findings, such as the observation that the eyebrow flash is typically used as a ritualized form signaling friendly openness for social contact, but cultural differences remain. For instance, in Japan, greeting someone with an eyebrow flash is regarded as inappropriate (Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989)). Another example of a ritualized form of expressive behavior used as a communicative signal is the norm of territorial behavior in face-to-face communication, which varies from culture to culture. For instance, Arabs tend to stay inside the olfactory bubble of their interlocutors, whereas Americans tend to stay outside of it to keep a comfortable conversational distance (Hall (1968)). Awareness of culture-specific ritualized forms of expressive behavior is important because it is the prerequisite for maintaining interaction that can establish a bond with members of the speech community.

Senft goes on to discuss the concept of "ritual communication" which he defines as "artful, performed semiosis, predominantly but not only involving speech, that is formulaic and repetitive and therefore anticipated within particular contexts of social interaction" (Basso and Senft (2009: 1)). An example of a form of ritual communication is seen in the palm fruit festival of the Yamomamö, a group of people living in the Amazon rainforest, during which smaller villages manage to form alliances with other villages to

survive by entering mutual assistance pacts. The festival consists of rituals such as avowals of mutual sympathy in verbal interactions, joint meals, dances, communal mourning, staged fighting behavior, and exchanges of gifts, all of which function as signals of peacemaking, bonding, appeasing, and establishing harmony (Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989)). Lastly, Senft presents Levinson's (2006) hypothesis of the "interaction engine," which argues that the vast variety of forms of human interaction in different cultures can be attributed to a set of cognitive abilities and behavioral dispositions human beings are natively endowed with as underlying universal properties.

Here, the author tells us that he was unable to read the meaning of the Trobriand Islanders' eyebrow flash that always accompanied the question *Ambe?* He viewed it as equivalent to a casual Western form of greeting like "Hi"; it actually is a form of ritual communication that has a socially important bonding function.

Chapter 4, "Pragmatics and ethnology: The interface of language, culture and cognition," first discusses the claim by Malinowski, the founder of anthropological linguistics, that the meaning of a word lies in its use and studying meaning requires examining utterances in their situative context. This insight was gained from his field research on the Trobriand Islands, where he found that Trobriand Islanders' magical formulae can be interpreted only in correlation to their belief that the words have specific power over nature and their lives.

One of the important notions proposed by Malinowski is "phatic communion," "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (Malinowski (1936: 313ff.)) such as greeting formulae and comments on weather. Although Malinowski, with the explicit mention of a Melanesian greeting expression, exclusively emphasizes the bonding function of phatic communion in that it establishes a friendly atmosphere in interpersonal encounters, Senft critically argues that it actually conveys more. For example, the Trobriand Islanders' greeting question *Ambe?* not only means security within the social network of the community, but it may also trigger informative exchanges. Similarly, although most apologies observed in Japanese interaction seem to be desubstantialized routines with no semantic content, they should be understood as significantly reflecting social values and attitudes prevalent in Japanese culture (Coulmas (1981)). A case in point regarding phatic communion in Malinowski's sense is found in Korean greeting phrases such as "*ōdi ka-seyo?*" literally meaning "Are you going somewhere?" but practically meaning "Hi!"; it has to be responded to with "*ne, annyōngha-seyo?*" meaning "Yes, I am, how are you?" (Park

(2006)).

In the second part of this chapter, Senft presents the linguistic relativity hypothesis proposed by Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1940), which states that language determines, or at least influences thought. This claim has been tested via cross-cultural research on conceptions of space and frames of spatial references in many different languages, and it has been argued that although language can shape thought used in non-verbal problem solving, other possibilities besides language, such as the beliefs and practices, should be taken into consideration as well. The chapter ends by introducing the ethnography of speaking paradigm founded by Hymes (1962), which allows researchers to attempt to be on common grounds with the communities they study in their exploration of how those communities regulate their ways of speaking and create social and cultural realities.

What does this chapter indicate with regard to Senft's episode? We can say now that the author's inadequate response to the question *Ambe?* can be attributed to his misunderstanding of the question as just phatic communion in Malinowski's sense. The question *Ambe?* is never meaningless or aimless but attempts to elicit truthful and sufficient information.

Chapter 5, "Pragmatics and sociology: Everyday social interaction," introduces the research of three North American sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s: Goffman's ideas on social interaction, Garfinkel's ethnomethodological studies on social order, and "Conversation Analysis" (CA) developed by Sacks. Their insights significantly impact the understanding of everyday human interaction, communicative behavior, and language use in conversation.

Goffman's (1967) theory of interaction order is based on his views that social interaction is ordered and regulated by normative rights and obligations, and interactions are constructed by participants' constantly creating new contexts through monitoring behaviors, inferring one another's intensions, and protecting "face" by complying with the rules of social life. Garfinkel's (1967) framework for ethnomethodology focused on how ordinary members of a community used taken-for-granted, common-sense knowledge as a means of explaining the practical reasoning and understanding behind their organized artful practices of everyday life.

Under the influence of Goffman and Garfinkel, Sacks developed the field of Conversation Analysis in cooperation with Schegloff and Jefferson with the aim of revealing how conversation is structurally organized (e.g. Sacks et al. (1974)). CA holds that conversation is produced out of sequences of actions and language is concerned with implementing actions such as

requesting, offering, and greeting, rather than with meaning. Using finely transcribed audio- and video- recordings of naturally occurring conversations, a number of phenomena have been examined, including the opening and closing of conversations, storytelling in conversation, turn-taking, repair, and adjacency pair, and it has been revealed that conversation is an orderly activity in which the participants co-construct meaning.

The perspective provided by this chapter highlights the fact that the author's inadequate response to the question *Ambe?* was caused by his unawareness of the Trobriand Islanders' frame of interaction order with which a question-response adjacency pair is co-constructed in an orderly way. Once the author understood the Trobriand Islanders' set of moral rights and rituals, he could respond to the question providing adequate information and construct his turn in an orderly and meaningful way.

Chapter 6, "Pragmatics and politics: Language, social class, ethnicity and education and linguistic ideologies," begins with an explanation that sociolinguistics arose in the 1960s when the topics of class structure and social inequalities were being debated under the influence of Marxist and New Left ideologies. Sociolinguistics in this period focused on issues such as the connection between speech form and class structure as well as language varieties as emblems of social identity.

Bernstein (1967), a British sociologist and former teacher, developed a "code theory" that classified the speech of lower class people as a "restricted" code and the speech of the middle class as an "elaborated" code. This caused political and pedagogical arguments both in Europe and North America and resulted in an attempt to provide children from lower class families with compensatory education programs aimed at "repairing" their verbal deficits. This in turn triggered the proponents' argument that lower class children's language use should be examined and understood properly, and this attempt resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

Labov and his colleagues criticized Bernstein's code theory for being based on inadequate data and linguistic expertise, as well as language ideologies of researchers who were from the (upper) middle class. Labov (1970), with his sociolinguistic approach based on data analysis, not only demonstrated that Standard English and what he called Non-standard Negro English are both dialects that have distinct grammatical rules and a logic of their own, but also made a plea for the appropriate treatment of the non-standard dialect of Black school children. These studies have revealed that language varieties can be status emblems and language use and that lan-

guage ideology contribute to the creation of sociocultural identity.

This chapter helps us in understanding the linguistic ideology that underlies the Trobriand Islanders' greeting behavior. Whoever is greeted with *Ambe?* has to answer truthfully, regardless of any status difference. This is politically important because it exerts hierarchy levelling and a socially bonding function in the Trobriand Islanders' highly hierarchal society.

As mentioned above, Chapters 1 through 6 cover the wide scope of pragmatics, including not only an explanation of the major theories in different domains, but also discussions with abundant examples that adopt a cross-cultural/cross-linguistic perspective. The final chapter, Chapter 7, after giving a summary of the previous six chapters, ends with an outlook on recent developments within pragmatics. To conclude this review, I will provide brief comment on what the author expects in the future of pragmatics to bring us.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

In Chapter 7, admitting that the theories in pragmatics predominately arise from West-European and Anglo-American traditions, the author points out that the cross-linguistic/cross-cultural orientation of pragmatics has revealed that theories that claim universality, such as Searle's and Grice's, are not always applicable to non-Indo-European languages. This awareness led the author to express interest in the new movement, "emancipatory pragmatics," proposed by Hanks et al. (2009a), which questions the unidirectional flow of most theories from Euro-America to the rest of the world, and aims to break free from the constraints of established paradigms by multiplying the sources of theory. The author concludes the book by quoting provocative questions raised by Hanks et al. (2009a: 2), such as "what would happen ... were we to apply a concept like the Japanese *wakimae* 'discernment' to a language like Yucatec Maya or English?"; "what could honorifics usage and interpretation in Thai or Japanese tell us about languages like English or Finnish?"

After this book was published, another special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* on emancipatory pragmatics (see Hanks et al. (2014)) was printed in addition to the first two (see Hanks et al. (2009b) and Hanks et al. (2012)), the promising discussion for which the author shows appreciation. Let me add some updated details on the development of emancipatory pragmatics. The contributions to date include papers that attempt to break the unidirectional flow of theories by using the theory of *ba* "place/



field,” which originates in a Japanese philosophical idea in the work of Nishida and Shimizu (Shimizu (2000); Ide (2011)). *Ba* refers to “the field in which interaction emerges, where the participants as well as the surrounding environment stand as components that are indispensable from each other” (Saft (2014: 116)). It can be differentiated from the notion of context that assumes a distinction between the self and the other that has existed in Western academia for a long time and stresses the reflexive relationship between social actors and the surrounding environment. Fujii (2012) comparatively analyzed Japanese and American interactions and discussed their culturally rooted ways of situating the self in *ba*; specifically, it provided a deeper explication of phenomena in which Japanese speakers resonate with one another and the boundary of self disappears, as if the self and the other had one mind. Further, Saft (2014) deployed the notion of *ba* as an alternative to the individualism-collectivism dichotomy to analyze English language interaction and argued that *ba* offers an opportunity to better understand a dynamic process in which speakers enter into a merged relationship while reexamining the dominant ideas about the Western self. Thus, emancipatory pragmatics has shown the potential for emancipating the circle of pragmatics from its theoretical orthodoxies and moving beyond them; this surely provides a positive approach to tackle the distorting effects the author revealed that have been caused by unilaterally applying Western notions of language use to non-Western practices.

The book’s major strength, in my view, is the argumentative explanation of the established theories within pragmatics, incorporating ample examples from various languages and cultures. When compared with other widely read introductory books on pragmatics, such as those by Thomas (1995), Levinson (1992), and Mey (1993), which mainly focus on Western theories, this book stands out in that it both presents those theories and critically assesses them by calling into question their applicability to various cultures. This is thanks to the author’s consistent cross-linguistic/cross-cultural attitude toward pragmatics cultivated by his own experience. He acts not as an armchair researcher but as a field researcher who has struggled for an indigenous lens perspective to get on common ground with communities whose members speak non-Indo-European languages, such as Austronesian and Papuan languages. This reminds the reader of the fact that any type of language use is of equal value insofar as it represents its situative, cultural, societal, and political embedding of meaning. Moreover, this book encourages researchers, especially researchers of non-Euro-American backgrounds who tend to be fettered by received theories, to reconsider their own cultur-

al and linguistic phenomena from their own perspectives, while suggesting that it is important to be aware that established theories from Euro-American traditions are based on just one set of culture-specific assumptions and ideas. Because pragmatics is the transdiscipline that brings together various disciplines within the humanities, the fruits of pragmatics should contribute to increased mutual understanding and respect in cross-cultural interaction.

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