Book Reviews

Pragmalinguistics: Theory and Practice

Jacob L. Mey, Editor

"Pragmalinguistics" or the occupation with pragmatic aspects of language can be important where computational linguists or artificial intelligence researchers are concerned with natural language interfaces to computers, with modelling dialogue behavior, or the like. What speakers intend with their utterances, how hearers react to what they hear, and what they take the words to mean will all play a role of increasing importance when natural language systems have matured enough to cope readily with syntax and semantics. Asking a *sensible* question to a user or giving him a *reasonable* response often enough depends not only on the "pure" meaning of some previous utterances but also on attitudes, expectations, and intentions that the user may have. These are partly conveyed in the user's utterances and have to be taken into account, if a system is to do more than just give factual answers to factual requests.

Thus someone who wants to construct a natural language system might look at Mey's book *Pragmalinguistics* with some expectations as to what he should consider or what guidelines he should follow, or maybe just to find out what the current state of the art in pragmatics is. However, he will find little of that in this book. *Pragmalinguistics* is a collection of articles dealing with many different things—some of the articles could instead of being called *pragmatic* or *pragmalinguistic* be labelled *sociolinguistic*. Most authors that have contributed to this volume are located in Scandinavia, and thus maybe it gives a good impression of the concerns of North European linguists.

The article by Bang and Door gives a critique of the linguistic theories of Lyons, Habermas, Bernstein, and Ehlich and Rehbein from a Marxist point of view. The article by Qvortrup criticizes Transformational Grammar—and in particular the Language Acquisition Device—again from a Marxist point of view and with a breath-taking ignorance of what TG is all about. Lindberg's article on units of speech is trivial and Utaker's on semantics is outdated.

Blakar writes on language as a means of social power. His paper is anecdotal; he draws conclusions without stating from what premises; and he is on the whole not very explicit. Gregersen postulates in his article on the relationships between social class and language usage that an economic analysis of "objective class positions" has to precede sociolinguistic studies proper, but fails to show how the results of such an analysis will influence sociolinguistics.

Haeberlin writes on class-specific vocabulary as a communication problem. His ideas have been published before and in more detail. But he at least makes substantial and concrete claims, and he has a reasonable framework for his research, even though he admits that the results he has obtained in his statistical studies are only preliminary in nature. He found, for instance, that members of the middle class have a higher ability to gather the meanings of new words in conversations than members of the lower class do. Jacobsen writes on language and emotions much from the point of view of a psychotherapist. The emphasis of his article is more on explaining emotions than on explaining the relationship between language and emotions.

Olsen's paper is on psychopathology, interaction and pragmatic linguistics. Sondergaard's topic is the neurolinguistic concept of the ontogenesis and disintegration of smooth articulation.

Andersen is concerned with the syntax of texts and the syntax of actions. He has been influenced by work done at SRI International, and his analysis of actions resembles the SRI action graphs. It may be worthwhile to look at the differences in detail. Bjerg wites on public speech acts, and Gloy states some postulates for a theory of linguistic manipulation.

Schank's article—the only one in the book that carries the term *computational* in its title—gives a summary of Conceptual Dependency Theory because he feels that is the (only?) prerequisite for computational pragmatics.

In his closing paper on critical language theory Mey points out a number of phenomena having to do with the pragmatics of natural language that should be dealt with by an integrated linguistic theory.

Pragmalinguistics is a book with an unfortunate history, which delayed its publication for a long time —maybe for too long. It is not very useful for someone who expects concrete results applicable to the construction of a natural language system. But it may be of interest anyway, as it gives a different (often Marxist) perspective on linguistic phenomena that some may not have considered to be linguistic phenomena at all.

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