

## *Reviews* *Comptes rendus*

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**Betty J. Birner.** 2013. *Introduction to pragmatics*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. Pp. x + 344. CAN \$48.95 (softcover).

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Can *Introduction to pragmatics*, included in the series Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics, be described as a good textbook? We will answer this question at the end of the review. A quick glance at the contents reveals that this volume seems to adopt a narrow Anglo-American perspective on pragmatics, and mainly follows the style of the now-classic textbook on pragmatics by Levinson (1983), covering such traditional topics as Gricean implicature, reference, presupposition, and speech acts. It deals as well with some other topics including information structure, inferential relations, and dynamic semantics. There is also a separate chapter devoted to later developments on Gricean implicature.

This book comprises 10 chapters. The first, “Defining Pragmatics”, begins by defining some basic concepts and discussing methodological considerations, and then deals with the boundary between semantics and pragmatics; more ink is devoted to semantics than to pragmatics in this chapter, since the focus is on formal logic and truth conditions. For Birner, semantic meaning is context-independent or truth-conditional, while pragmatic meaning is context-dependent or non-truth-conditional. The next two chapters pertain to implicature. Chapter 2, “Gricean Implicature”, deals with the cooperative principle, types of implicature, testing for implicature and the Gricean model of meaning. Chapter 3, “Later Approaches to Implicature”, discusses the neo-Gricean theory developed by Horn (1984) and Levinson (2000), as well as relevance theory (proposed by Sperber and Wilson 1986). It then compares and contrasts these two theories by examining how they treat scalar implicature. In Chapter 4, “Reference”, Birner covers referring expressions, deixis (personal, spatial, temporal and discourse), definiteness and indefiniteness, anaphora, and referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. Presupposition is the focus of Chapter 5, where the author discusses presupposition triggers, the projection problem, defeasibility, presupposition as common ground,

and accommodation, concluding that “the pragmatics of definiteness, presupposition, and accommodation are interrelated” (p. 172) and that, when it comes to explaining one concept, the others should also be taken into account. Chapter 6 explores one of the fundamental and foundational issues in pragmatics, that is, speech acts. Birner discusses performative utterances, felicity conditions, locutionary acts, direct and indirect speech acts, face and politeness, and joint acts.

What the above chapters cover are traditional topics which are usually covered in general introductory books on pragmatics (e.g., Levinson 1983, Huang 2007, Grundy 2008, Chapman 2011, Archer et al. 2012). In what is perhaps in an attempt to be different from similar titles on the market, or due to Birner’s perspective on what pragmatics should deal with, in the rest of the volume, the author addresses other topics that are usually not fully covered in a standard textbook on pragmatics or societal pragmatics (Mey 2001). The next two chapters are related to each other. Chapter 7, “Information Structure”, mainly discusses “the range of pragmatic meanings conveyed by the use of various syntactic structures” (p. 207). The subjects covered include topic and focus, open propositions, discourse status and hearer status, three classes of non-canonical constructions in English (preposing, postposing and argument reversal), and functional compositionality. Chapter 8 continues the discussion of the previous chapter and focuses on inferential relations, examining how they play a role in information status at the constituent level, and outlining a taxonomy of inferential relations. Inferential relations at the propositional level are also discussed in this chapter.

In Chapter 9, “Dynamic Semantics and the Representation of Discourse”, the author shows that a dynamic discourse representation theory (DRT) provides a formal notation for the representation of running discourse; that is, “a means of tracking referents from one sentence to another within the discourse” (pp. 284–285) and “it replaces certain options for representation with rules for the use of those options” (p. 285). Finally, in the concluding chapter, the author sums up some findings on the semantics/pragmatics boundary, with the conclusion that “no final dividing line” (p. 304) between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning can be presented. The chapter also touches upon “a small sample” (p. 296) of applications of linguistic pragmatics in the real world, and makes conjectures about the future of pragmatics within linguistic theory. For each chapter, the author provides a learner-friendly summary. There are also several exercises and discussion questions at the end of each chapter, which would be more useful to the reader if some possible answers were provided for reference.

We now return to the question we asked at the beginning of the review. All in all, this is a good textbook on pragmatics in the sense that it covers both traditional and more recent topics in pragmatics, and the concepts are described and explained in an accessible way. Numerous illuminating examples are excerpted from novels and magazines to help clarify the ideas and viewpoints discussed. Pragmatics is a relatively young, but rapidly growing discipline, with several subdisciplines (e.g., societal pragmatics, cognitive pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics, corpus pragmatics internet pragmatics; see Yus 2011, Xie 2015). Given this fact, it is no easy matter to decide what to include in an introductory book on pragmatics. Another factor

that may affect the choice of topics for such a book is the approach adopted by the author and her goal, which may affect the way pragmatics is presented. Birner claims that “one focus of this book is the question of the semantics/pragmatics boundary” (p. 99), and “this question constitutes a recurring theme in this book” (p. x). Perhaps because of this, while reading the book, we sometimes feel that the scope of pragmatics could have been broader.

We also feel that even some traditional topics are dealt with in a rather cursory way. For instance, the topic of face and politeness is included in the chapter on speech acts and covered in less than two typeset pages. Only Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1978) is touched upon, with positive face, negative face and face-threatening acts mentioned. No mention is made of any important debates or more recent developments in both politeness and impoliteness studies (e.g., Watts 2003, Bousfield 2008, Culpeper 2011). Politeness and impoliteness can arguably be said to be of more immediate and obvious significance for social interaction and human existence.

To sum up, students who are formally or syntactically minded may find this book engaging, valuable and worth reading. It is indeed a welcome addition to the literature on pragmatics in general, and undergraduate and graduate students will surely learn a lot from it. Those trying to gain a better and deeper understanding of how pragmatics can be used to solve real life social problems may be somewhat disappointed. The book puts too much focus on the semantics/pragmatics boundary, and there are some other key issues that are more important and crucial to tackle. For instance, knowing more about applications of pragmatics in the real world can be useful. Actually, if we view pragmatics “through the prism of society” (Mey 2016), we may find that language cannot be detached “from the people using it, nor from the circumstances of their lives” (Mey 2016: 35). Ultimately, pragmatics should, among other things, perform an emancipatory function by “‘unveiling’ cases of linguistic manipulation” (Mey 2016: 37). Besides, given that the Internet has, to a large extent, revolutionized our language use and social interaction, we are also interested in being better informed about how people do things on the Internet, what new light pragmatics can shed on Internet-mediated interaction, and what technologically-mediated communication may bring to our understanding of pragmatics. Unfortunately, the topic of pragmatics and technology is only briefly touched upon in the book.

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