Book Review


Approaches to Internet Pragmatics: Theory and Practice, edited by Francisco Yus Ramos, Chaoqun Xie, and Hartmut Haberland is a collection of research on internet pragmatics with contributions from leading experts and emerging scholars in the field. The book explores a wide range of pragmatic issues related to the use of language and communication in online contexts, including the application of traditional linguistic theories on Internet language, the role of culture and identity in online communication, and the challenges of understanding and analysing online discourses and genres.

The introduction of the book “Approaching Internet Pragmatics” articulates the framework for the ensuing chapters as examining internet pragmatics from a functional perspective with the goal of describing and explaining “how users resort to various linguistic and/or semiotic resources on and via the internet to express and understand themselves as well as others” (p. 7). The introduction defines Internet pragmatics as, “broadly conceived and simply put, concerned with the pragmatics of internet communication” (p. 4). Specifically, key aspects of online communication addressed in this collection include contextual constraints, such as personality, identity, and self-presentation strategies, and non-propositional effects, such as feelings and emotions.

The remaining of the book is divided into three parts. The first part Theoretical and methodological perspectives has five chapters that deal with the epistemological and practical aspects of internet pragmatics. Chapter 1 “Expanding pragmatics: values, goals, ranking, and internet adaptability” by Jacob L. Mey argues that the values of online interaction are evaluated, ranked and constructed in a pragmatic manner. On the one hand, the values depend on “likes” or “hits”; on the other, the evaluation emerges from meaning-making
activities such as “texting”, “tweeting”, or “instagramming”. The author conceptualizes a pragmatic act as “a situationally determined instance of ‘adaptability’ as ‘contextualized adaptive [human] behaviour’” (p. 43). However, in digital communication, values are not just individualistic but also societal, and the societal values and personal values often clash, leading to “adaptability” being reduced to mere passive “adaptivity”.

In Chapter 2 “Computer-mediated discourse in context: Pluralism of communicative action and discourse common ground”, Anita Fetzer adopts a discourse-pragmatics approach and explores the impact of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) on the key pragmatic notions such as context, contextualization and indexicality. Through a case study on the media coverage of Magid Magid, a former refugee who became Sheffield Lord Mayor, Fetzer demonstrates that the unique characteristics of CMD, such as its hypertextuality and multilayered participation, facilitates multiple communicative actions and co-construction of discourse common ground. The author concludes by advocating a holistic perspective to capture CMD with “dynamic, metarelational and multilayered adaptations” (p. 71).

Chapter 3 “Cyberpragmatics in the age of locative media” by Francisco Yus follows the framework of cyberpragmatics and focuses on locative media (LM), a digital technology that allows users to share their physical location information and interact with other users based on that location. Yus examines various stages of Internet interaction through LM and their influence on communication quality in both physical and virtual environments. Using the example of Facebook check-ins, Yus analyses user-related and interface-related contextual constraints and the willingness of users on location sharing, which can lead to inferred information and non-propositional effects, such as feelings of co-presence or group membership.

Chapter 4 “Interpreting emoji pragmatics” by Ashley R. Dainas and Susan C. Herring reports on the Understanding Emoji Survey, which was conducted to determine how social media users interpret the pragmatic functions of popular emoji contextualized in Facebook comments. The results showed that the most common use of emoji is to modify the tone of messages and that users’ interpretation of pragmatic functions varies based on the emoji type. Their study addresses the second theme of this section (methodological perspectives) and “showed that surveys can also be used to assess lay user understandings of the pragmatic functions of emoji-in-use” (p. 140).

Chapter 5 “Speech acts and the dissemination of knowledge in social networks” by Paolo Labinaz and Marina Sbisà concludes the first part of the book. Following Austin’s classes of illocutionary acts, the authors analyse their
procedural steps and the knowledge-disseminating effects, illustrated with Facebook comments from a popular Italy newspaper’s page. They find that the most direct way to present information as knowledge is through the use of verdictives, but this is a risky move as it can easily be challenged without evidence or reasons provided from users. This study proves that an Austin-based speech act theoretical framework can be applied to both Internet-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction.

The second part of the collection The discursive management of self on the internet consists of three chapters that explore how individuals manage their self-presentation through language on the internet. In Chapter 6 “Humour and self-presentation on WhatsApp profile status”, Carmen Maíz-Arévalo investigates the use of humour in Spanish WhatsApp user’s statuses as a self-presentation strategy. The findings show that humour is used in 12.62% of statuses, slightly lower than the most frequent self-generated status (emotional statuses) at 14.56%. Most users still opt for automatically generated statuses (29.61%). The strategies for creating humorous statuses mostly involve intertextuality and incongruity, but are often combined. Results indicate a trend for male users to display more humour than female users, but the role of age is unclear due to limited data.

In Chapter 7 “Inviting a purchase: a multimodal analysis of staged authenticity in WeChat social selling”, Chaoqun Xie and Ying Tong analyse social selling influencer’s self-presentation on WeChat, a popular social networking site in China. Drawing on Goffman and Page’s work on frame and digital narrative, they found that these influencers relied on product-oriented multimodal narrative, personal connections and staged authenticity in the promotion of endorsed products. The narrative was a performance of authenticity, assisted by WeChat affordances such as images in Moments and shared chat logs. Additionally, the use of emojis reduced the imposing force of authenticity and strengthens the force of appealing.

Chapter 8 “Online nicks, impoliteness, and Jewish identity in Israeli Russian conflict discourse” by Renee Perelmutter discuss the relationship between nickname choice, manipulation and identity construction in an online community of ex-Soviet migrants to Israel. Adopting Culpeper’s insights on impoliteness strategies, she analysed how interlocutors use Inappropriate Identity Markers (IIM), such as identity-related criticism and nickname manipulation in response to provocative or problematic identity positions. Her study shows that the choice of nicks is related to identity positions and political stances, and their manipulation reflects complex aspects of communal identity and history.
The third and last part of the collection *Pragmatics of internet-mediated texts* contains three chapters that presents the discourse characteristics of different online genres. Chapter 9 “Candidates’ use of Twitter during the 2016 Austrian presidential campaign” by Helmut Gruber analyses communication strategies of candidates on Twitter during three ballots of an election campaign. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods, he provides a mixed answer to the normalization (a traditional, distanced politician-citizen relationship) or innovation (a direct, balanced relationship facilitated by Internet) hypothesis and suggests that election success is not directly related to the amount of information provided by candidates.

In Chapter 10 “A study on how cultural and gender parameters affect emoticon distribution, usage and frequency in American and Japanese online discourse”, Barry Kavanagh examines the use of emoticons in online blog comments and how gender and culture can influence their usage. Emoticons were found to have semantic (propositional) and pragmatic (speech act) functions, and Japanese bloggers used more emoticons to enhance politeness than American bloggers. Japanese women used more emoticons than Japanese men, while there was no significant gender difference in American bloggers. He argues that the cultural backgrounds and language play tradition in Japan may account for such differences.

Finally, Chapter 11 “Migration through the English-Greek translated press” by Maria Sidiropoulou analyses the representation of marginalized groups in news institutions through translation in both traditional and online media. She found that Greek translation can resist practices that depict “others” unfavourably, as in the English version, and downplay the spread of fear and hate through the Internet. The study also highlights the impact of translation on shaping public ethics and the public sphere. It suggests that journalist-translator trainees and readers should be aware of the manipulative power of the media and the role of translation in reshaping global dissemination.

Overall, this book serves as a cornerstone for understanding the evolution and nuances of internet communication. It is an informative collection with pioneering insights and research for applied linguists and anyone interested in exploring the dynamic field of online communication. Its well-structured and organized layout provides a comprehensive overview of the theories and methodological insights that shape our understanding of internet pragmatics. The inclusion of empirical studies from a diverse range of languages, including Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Russian, and Greek, showcases a rich tapestry of diverse cultures and languages under a cutting-edge pragmatic examination. Furthermore, its inclusion of popular global
and local platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, and online forums highlights the book’s commitment to staying at the forefront of modern communication trends.

In conclusion, this book provides a valuable and insightful examination of internet pragmatics, specifically the functional perspective on text-based online communication. It is important to recognize that text-based communication remains a prevalent and significant aspect of internet interaction, making it an important area of study. It would be valuable for future studies to incorporate a greater multimodal perspective and delve deeply into other forms of online communication, such as video and audio. The book provides a solid foundation for exploring the role of other forms of online communication.

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