Book Review


Since its early conception within language philosophy, pragmatics has moved from theoretical discussions about how language is used to achieve certain goals into becoming a fully-fledged and vastly explored area in applied linguistics. From exploring the language comprehension and production of speakers in various L1, L2, and multilingual contexts, scholarship has now turned its attention to how learners come to acquire features related to L2 pragmatics, such as speech acts and figurative language, and if and how these features can be taught. It is within this landscape that Attardo and Pickering situate their book, Pragmatics and its Applications to TESOL and SLA.

The book is based on a series of university lectures given by the authors – indeed, they have included a chapter on research methods to account for potential research components in post-graduate courses. Thus, the target audience for the book, as stated in the preface, is primarily post-graduate students. However, the authors at times ‘break the fourth wall’ by explicitly addressing language teachers, so this book also appears to target language teachers.

Sprinkled with humour, which is befitting a textbook on pragmatics, Attardo and Pickering take the reader on a tour through the landscape of pragmatics: simply put, where the field has been and where it is going. The book comprises eleven chapters, some of which are structured in such a way that they present the theoretical background of a topic followed by its applications in second language acquisition (SLA) and teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL). These will be briefly presented below.

Chapter 1, ‘Meaning’, explores some central ideas within the field of semantics, which the authors argue is related to pragmatics under the overarching principle that what is actually said can be different from its meaning.
To establish the connection between the two fields, the authors initially introduce some key terms and topics, such as semiotics and signs (which they revisit in relation to metapragmatics in chapter 10), before making a connection to the field of pragmatics, arguing that “pragmatics is the interplay of the semantic code, with contextual information, logical inferences, and pragmatic principles such as Relevance” (p.11).

In chapter 2, ‘The language teaching and pragmatics interface’, the authors present some key questions identified within interlanguage pragmatics, such as “can pragmatics be taught through instruction?” (p. 19). Specifically, the authors argue that they have chosen questions typically raised by TESOL teachers. The chapter foregrounds theories presented later in the book and provides a review of the empirical research conducted to provide answers to each question posed throughout the chapter. It is worth mentioning here that the chapter focuses strictly on interlanguage pragmatics, which the authors also highlight in the concluding remarks, where they point out that other areas, e.g. “the experience of multilingual speakers and the specific context of English as a Lingua Franca” (p. 23), are addressed later in the book.

Chapter 3, titled ‘Speech acts’, presents the seminal works by Austin and Searle on how people “do things with words” (Austin, 1962) by situating them in the context of where the ideas have developed. Thus, the chapter incorporates part of the field’s canon by bringing in locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, as well as Searle’s (1979) classification of speech acts.

‘Grice’s principle of cooperation’, another aspect of the pragmatics canon, is explored in chapter 4. The chapter provides the reader with insights into Grice’s cooperation principle and four maxims, i.e. quantity, quality, relation, and manner. An interesting perspective here is the nuanced view of the speaker as an active agent who may choose to follow these maxims for the purposes of effective communication. In other words, as the authors argue, although Grice presented the maxims as imperatives, they are not prescriptive rules that the speaker must blindly follow in real social interaction.

Chapter 5, ‘Politeness’, presents a chronological overview of the development of theories related to the important topic of linguistic politeness in pragmatics scholarship. The chapter addresses three perspectives: the first wave (the traditional view, such as Brown and Levinson, 1987), the second wave (the discursive view, such as Eelen, 2001), and the third wave (a synthesis of the two, such as Terkourafi, 2005). Thus, the reader is taken on a tour through the past 40 years of seminal works in linguistic (im)politeness, moving from a hypothetical model speaker to views grounded in discourse and language corpora.

Under the title ‘Functional sentence perspective’, chapter 6 explores the organisation of new and old information in communication. The authors also
present an historical overview of the different approaches to functionalism. One of the core tenets of the chapter is that the main function of language is communication, and the chapter explores some of the main ideas of functionalism and how these interact with, for instance, syntactic constructions to reflect the speaker’s subjective perspective.

Moving to the concept of metapragmatics (which is revisited in chapter 10), in chapter 7, ‘Stance, deixis, and pragmatic markers’, the authors turn their attention to implicit, grammatical metapragmatics. The chapter explores the speaker’s attitudes and stance in relation to what is being said. For instance, the authors present the use of deictic words and how their meaning is determined by contextual cues, that is, how they derive their full meaning from sociopragmatic variables. Similarly, the authors make a link between discourse markers, their meaning, and the context.

Chapter 8, titled ‘Interactional sociolinguistics’, is mainly grounded in the work of Gumperz and initially addresses the intellectual environment (referred to as the California milieu) in which his approach developed before turning to phenomenology and conversation analysis. Most notable, perhaps, is the account of communicative competence (e.g. Hymes, 1972) and its development, followed by in-depth presentation of context, through the lens of Gumperz’ work.

Acknowledging that many post-graduate-level courses in pragmatics include a component on research, chapter 9, ‘Data collection and research design in studies of L2 pragmatics’, looks into some of the common research approaches within the field. The chapter describes discourse completion tasks, interactional studies, (pseudo)longitudinal (e.g. cross-sectional and study-abroad studies), computer mediated communication research (e.g. using online tools as part of instruction), and action research (e.g. student-collected research). In other words, the chapter provides a useful springboard for students designing their own research projects.

Revisiting the concept of ‘Metapragmatics’, in chapter 10 the authors explore, what they argue, are the most recent developments in pragmatics scholarship, e.g. indexicality and “the semiotic turn in sociolinguistics” (p. 172). After exploring the origins of the term ‘metalanguage’ and its relevance for linguistics, the authors engage in a discussion of metadiscourse. Furthermore, the concepts of implicit and explicit awareness are introduced, before the chapter concludes with a focus on language ideology.

The final chapter, ‘Frontier’, focuses on what the authors refer to as some of the most recent developments in pragmatics. This includes a focus on pragmatics through the lens of English as a lingua franca, the multilingual learner, and neuropragmatics, the latter also including a section on brain disorders.
As opposed to most of the previous chapters, which have a clear path from theory to practice via empirical research, this chapter is organised as a review of recent research to show the reader the developments within the field.

In addition to theory, chapters 3–8 conclude with insights from SLA and suggestions for teaching, i.e. applications to SLA and TESOL. With regard to the insights from SLA, this relates to empirical evidence from studies, some of which the authors have conducted themselves. For example, chapter 3, ‘Speech acts’, briefly presents taxonomies developed for apologies and compliments, as well as offering examples of findings from instructional studies that show the potential for teaching speech acts, whilst chapter 8, ‘Interactional sociolinguistics’ provides examples of misunderstandings caused by teaching assistants’ tone choice and how it affects rapport-building with students. When it comes to suggestions for teaching, the book offers materials developed by the authors themselves or from external literature (e.g. Tatsuki and Houck, 2010). These materials include: teaching implicatures by analysing discourse in light of contextual cues (chapter 4); teaching linguistic politeness through comparing and contrasting, for instance, L1 and L2 practices, and direct and indirect speech (chapter 5); and teaching the use of pragmatic markers through language corpora, e.g. comparing example sentences using the word well to derive its function as a pragmatic marker, adverb, or conjunction (chapter 7).

Overall, the book provides the novice reader with a comprehensive overview of the field of pragmatics and its related perspectives. Using real-life and concrete examples, often grounded in what seems to be Attardo’s love for doughnuts, the authors manage to present complex theories and perspectives in a reader-friendly and accessible way. This is where the main strength of the book lies: the comprehensive review of theories (which, the authors argue in the preface, separates their textbook from others aimed at the same level) and the way in which these are presented to the reader. The way these theories are contextualised by the authors, for instance, by exploring how different theorists crossed paths, is also an interesting and less common contribution.

However, the strength of the book also has a downside. The authors cover a vast amount of ground in roughly 200 pages. Thus, the sheer number of topics and theories included makes it difficult to include detailed accounts of nuances and differing views within the field, given the limited size of a textbook of this format. The authors do sometimes compensate by guiding the reader to relevant literature. In particular, the sections on applications to SLA and TESOL are not covered to the same extent and level of detail as the theoretical perspectives, as would be expected based on the title of the book.

The book is a testament to Attardo and Pickering’s wealth of teaching and research experience in and enthusiasm for the field of pragmatics, which
comes across clearly throughout the book. It is no easy feat to make the concepts and theories presented in the book accessible and reader-friendly, yet the authors have succeeded admirably in doing this. As a result, Pragmatics and its Applications to TESOL and SLA serves as an excellent point of departure for the novice reader to become acquainted with the field. Thus, Pragmatics and its Applications to TESOL and SLA will provide the reader with a solid theoretical foundation as well as practical suggestions that may serve as an inspiration to bring topics related to L2 pragmatics into the L2 classroom.

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References