PRAGMATICS: CHASING THE SKY OR ANOTHER WAY OF SEEING

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The danger lies not in the imaginary hydra of revolution, but in a stubborn traditionalism that stifles progress. (Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, Book I, Chapter 3)

1. INTRODUCTION: PRAGMATICS NOW

Today, pragmatics has arguably reached a crossroads. Two major trends or ‘schools’ have emerged over the past 30 years: the one rooted – perhaps ‘locked’ – in the ordinary language philosophy origins of pragmatics, and labelled the ‘Anglo-American’ tradition, the other extending that tradition to encompass a much broader range of issues which are psychological, sociological and contextual in orientation, and referred to as the ‘continental’ tradition (cf. Levinson, 1983; Horn and Ward, 2004, 2006; Mey, 2005). With the exception of his standalone chapter on conversation analysis, with its evident sociological and sociolinguistic leanings, Levinson (1983: Chapter 6), in his at the time pioneering introductory textbook, acknowledged that his approach was ‘conservative in scope and approach’ [my italics] which ‘builds directly, for the most part, on philosophical approaches to language of both the logical and “ordinary language” variety’ (1983: ix). By focusing on those topics he considered central to the tradition he was writing about (deixis, implicature, presupposition, and speech acts), Levinson made a principled decision to omit coverage of the more extended, continental, pragmatic model. The latter, arguably, was still at a comparatively modest stage in its development at the time. Whilst it certainly shared common cause with that tradition and its antisyntactic motivations, by contrast, the continental
model was – and is – driven by a strong social-critical tendency, and the influential view of language as situated communication (as opposed to mere grammatical system), with its roots in ethnomethodology (cf. Mey, 1998: 716–737; Verschueren, 1999a: 254–272). Important advances have been made in societal pragmatics over the intervening years, characterised by an emphasis on applying pragmatic ‘knowledge’ to real-world issues where, it could be argued, it partly shares a common agenda with linguistic anthropology (cf. Hoye, 2006a, b). Mey (2001: 310) records the growing perception of (continental) pragmatics ‘as a user-oriented science of language’, and Verschueren (1999a: 227–252) likewise highlights the empowering societal role ‘pragmatic investigations’ have to play in dealing with problems in language use.

Reviewing the status of pragmatics as a critical discipline, Verschueren (1999b) comments on how its institutional positioning and quest for legitimacy may potentially hinder change and progress. Pragmatics must not be perceived as a self-reflecting, self-perpetuating, institutionalised body of knowledge. The continued rehearsal in textbooks and journal articles of its core concepts and ideas, the ‘canon’ – the notions of ‘function’, conversational cooperation, politeness, context, culture are among those Verschueren (1999b: 874–876) cites – is, he suggests, latently inhibiting. The time seems ripe to consider possible future directions of pragmatics. Diversity is strength: pragmatics is a unique and powerful perspective – rather a brace of perspectives – on contextually situated human communicative activity. Pragmatics has considerably advanced and expanded the linguistics agenda. Could its perspectives not be used to explore other domains of human activity to further secure and enhance its contemporary relevance?

2. **Visual Pragmatics: Broadening the Agenda**

Pragmatics has traditionally focused on verbal communication (Mey, 2006: 51). Yet, as a powerful, philosophically rooted, contextually driven, socioculturally attuned perspective on (verbal) communication, pragmatics could surely be extended to encompass the visual–verbal interface. Work in multimodal discourse analysis recognises that there is ‘a shift of focus in linguistic enquiry where language use is no longer theorized as an isolated phenomenon’ (O’Halloran, 2004: 1). In fact, one could go further by claiming that, at the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we are moving from the linguistic turn or, as Mey (2006: 58) calls it, the ‘pragmatic turn’, to the age of the ‘pictorial turn’ and the transition from a culture dominated by the printed word to one dominated by the visual/visual–verbal interface.

A culture dominated or ‘bombarded with pictures from morning till night’ – to use Gombrich’s (1982: 137) renowned expression – is a reality on a global scale (see also Hoye and Kaiser, 2007; Machin and Van Leuween, 2007). The pragmatic salience of the image has been well caught by Barry (1997: 281–286) whose discussion of political images (images concerned with public relations, advertising and propaganda) uses CNN’s 24-hour coverage of the Gulf War (1991) – a