Philosophy in Review

Kate Scott, 'Pragmatics in English: An Introduction'

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See table of contents
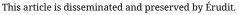
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Kate Scott. *Pragmatics in English: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press 2023. 260 pp. $99.00 USD (Hardcover 9781108836005); $32.99 USD (Paperback 9781108799102).

No small number of philosophers have thought that pragmatics, that sub-field of linguistics which studies language in context, is at best a wastebasket, and at worst an oxymoron. The very idea of a serious *science* of language *use* is sometimes considered a contradiction in terms. I would direct sceptics about the tractability of theoretical pragmatics to this wonderful new textbook by the English linguist, Kate Scott.

The book begins with a pair of chapters on 'What is pragmatics?' and the notion of speaker's meaning. Dr. Scott considers numerous views from competing theoretical traditions. One may think of pragmatics as the study of: language in context; language in use; utterance interpretation; the choices we make when we speak; how we understand what other people say; how meaning is produced and understood in context; etc. Ultimately, Scott's own considered stance is this: 'Pragmatics, as a field, is concerned with everything that is communicated by an utterance beyond the literal, encoded meanings of the words that are used' (5). She spells this out by expanding upon three key notions: what is communicated by the utterance, encoded meanings, and beyond the literal.

The first, taking a leaf from H. Paul Grice, involves the speaker's intentions. Utterance meaning, very crudely, is fixed by the beliefs which the speaker wants the hearer to take away. The idea behind the latter two notions, here taking leaves not only from Grice but from Noam Chomsky/Jerry Fodor, is this. There is typically a code roughly shared between interlocutors; the speaker uses it to encode a content, the hearer uses it to decode that content. In addition, interlocutors are constantly making inferences based on what gets coded. (Think of coding as pertaining to what the language user knows about the meaning of the type in the language; think of inference as what the rest of the mind contributes to figuring out speaker's intentions.) What happens constantly is that the contents which a speaker intends to convey may not correspond exactly to the meaning that arises from simply decoding her sentence. Consider an imagined exchange between Sam and Julia on page 13. Sam asks, 'Do you want another drink?' Julia replies, 'It's getting late'. Decoded meaning here falls very short of what Julia intends to convey, namely, that she does not want another drink. What fills the gap is pragmatics.

Next, in Chapter 3, Scott introduces traditional speech act theory as originating in J.L. Austin and John Searle *et al*. (From the viewpoint of traditional Relevance Theory, this may seem a bit of a detour. I'll return to it below.) Chapter 4 explains the specifics of Grice's own views on intentions and inference, while Chapter 5 surveys neo-Griceans such as Laurence Horn and Stephen Levinson. Chapter 6 then contrasts Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's Relevance Theory with these. Scott covers in these chapters not only the pragmatic processes that contribute to implicit utterance meaning (e.g., conversational implicatures), but also those processes that fix the strict and literal truth conditions of an utterance (such as reference assignment and disambiguation). Chapters 7-9 pursue applications of theoretical pragmatics to a wide range of issues, including weak implicatures, phatic communication, procedural meanings, hyperbole,

metaphor, and irony. There's also an entire chapter on politeness/face-saving strategies, laying out the core ideas of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson.

To round off my survey of the book's contents, it ends with a discussion of research methodologies in contemporary pragmatics. Scott begins with a method very familiar to philosophers, i.e., of imagining a conversational exchange and then consulting native-speaker intuitions about what would be achieved therein. But she also surveys experimental and corpus-based methodologies. She even introduces the application of pragmatics to literary texts. Let me turn squarely now to evaluation.

On the negative side, the textbook may be too narrowly pitched for some, especially if the reader has little time for Relevance Theory. In particular, a practitioner of what Scott labels 'social pragmatics' should look elsewhere for a course text. There are two issues that even I wish Scott had found space for. I am very curious what she would have to say about them. First is something methodological. The text is part of a series, *Cambridge Introductions to the English Language.* Yet Scott by no means restricts herself to evidence from English. There is, e.g., a fascinating extended discussion of conversation in Malagasy, which purportedly affords counterexamples to Grice's maxims. Nor are the generalizations she explains solely about English. Would it have been methodologically sound to simply discard evidence from other tongues, since the topic is only how pragmatics works in English? If that would be unacceptable, why so? All she says about this appears on page 243:

> Throughout this book we have focused on examples and studies in English, and the topics have been selected to support those who are studying or interested in English linguistics and English language studies. Our understanding of pragmatics and interpretive processes can, however, only be enriched by including analyses that cover a more diverse range of languages and cultural contexts.

Secondly, the sub-field of clinical pragmatics is oddly absent. I myself find this a shame, because clinical effects of acquired and genetically determined conversational impairments can inform pragmatic theorizing; and theoretical pragmatics can enrich the clinical practice of, e.g., Speech Language Pathologists. To take a salient example, high-functioning people on the Autism Spectrum have notorious selective difficulties with things like indirect speech acts, pronoun resolution and metaphor. Then again, maybe Scott was thinking that clinical applications would fall outside of theoretical pragmatics, her stated topic.

The positive side is very positive indeed. This book is clearly the fruit of many years of successful teaching. It's chock full of original and helpful examples. The chapters all begin with an overview and detailed table of contents, and end with helpful summaries, exercises and key terms introduced. Scott is very attuned to spots where students may struggle, and she pauses over common misunderstandings to recapitulate points where necessary. *Pragmatics in English* is, moreover, scrupulously accurate and fair in its explication of philosophical and linguistic theories. In particular, the lengthy discussions of both Grice and Austin struck me as exemplary. If only linguists were always so charitable to our deceased philosophical comrades! To be clear, there are of course simplifications that philosophical readers might criticize. As one example, one might balk

at the idea that every loose use—e.g., describing France as hexagonal—is a non-literal use. But, to my own mind, the simplifications are typically there for the sake of good pedagogy. Beyond exegesis, the writing is terrifically clear and accessible with respect to both the substantive and the methodological issues. I would draw attention in particular to chapters 3, 9 and 10. Though it is very much an introduction to pragmatics as pursued by Relevance Theorists—it is dedicated 'For Deirdre', i.e., to Scott's doctoral supervisor Prof. Deirdre Wilson—the book insightfully covers ground that has often been omitted from Relevance Theoretical treatments. Here's one way to come at the point. At least in the early days, Relevance Theorists frequently emphasized linguistic communication in the narrow sense of a speaker *S* having some thoughts in mind and trying to get a hearer *H* to share those thoughts. Linguistic interaction, that is, was conceived of as a matter of propositional messages going back and forth. Scott rightfully bucks this trend. As she aptly underscores in Chapter 9, 'When we communicate, we do not simply exchange information. We also manage relationships' (189). What's more, in the chapter on methodology, i.e., Chapter 10, Scott moves beyond the bounds of old-fashioned Relevance Theory's reliance on the theorists' intuitive judgements, illustrating the richness of 21st Century techniques.

In sum, this new book is ideal for a specialized third-year undergraduate course in linguistic pragmatics—if you teach pragmatics, or simply want to give your undergraduate or graduate students an accessible guide to the state of the art, I can't recommend this book highly enough. If you are simply a philosopher interested in learning yourself what has been going on in theoretical pragmatics of late, Scott's text would be excellent for that too. Indeed, I cannot think of a better secondary source. Finally, if you are one of those sceptics I mentioned at the outset, who questions the very possibility of a scientific pragmatics, you should read the book to see how the field has flourished since the 1980s.

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