

## Book review

**Understanding pragmatics**

Gunter Senft, Routledge, Oxon/New York, 2014, 222 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-84056-9, US\$ 135 (hardback, paperback available)

**1. General remarks**

Senft's *Understanding pragmatics* is a reasonably short, yet very rich, introduction to the field of pragmatics which promotes the discipline as a "transdiscipline", owing to the many bridges that can be built between pragmatics and other research domains in the humanities. Its main aim is thus to make explicit the relationships between pragmatics and several lines of disciplinary scientific inquiry, namely philosophy, psychology, ethology, ethnology, sociology and politics, through the discussion of communicative exchanges in light of the types of human behaviour that have typically and conventionally been observed to be associated with it. From Senft's perspective, which represents a fairly widespread position in the field – though, as I shall discuss further on, not the only one, the subject-matter of pragmatics can be elucidated by emphasising the social, interactional and conventional patterns found in human communicative interaction. In a nutshell, Senft's book is a textbook on the *pragmatics of interaction* which demonstrates and stresses the importance and influence of cross-cultural diversity in human communicative exchanges.

Senft organises the contents of the textbook along three main threads:

- The first holds that "languages are used by their speakers in social interactions" and that, as such, "they are first and foremost instruments for creating social bonds and accountability relations" (2014:3). This highlights the social function of language, which permeates all chapters of the book.
- The second follows [Bauman \(1992:147\)](#) and states that "meaning resides in the pragmatic function of an utterance", which is itself contextually determined. This licenses explorations in the communicative and cultural conventions of linguistic communities.
- The third idea that should be kept in mind while reading the textbook is Senft's definition of pragmatics, namely "the transdiscipline that studies [the] language- and culture-specific forms of language use." (2014:4).

In order to review and illuminate the relationships between pragmatics and several other disciplines, Senft draws on his vast knowledge of languages and language diversity to offer illustrations and support his claims, which allows us to go beyond the dominant euro-centric perspective on communication.

**2. Contents and structure**

The book consists of seven chapters of about 30 pages each, preceded by a short introduction which (i) introduces how the field of pragmatics came to be, (ii) presents the main issues the author will address, and (iii) announces the contents of the monograph, chapter by chapter. The seventh chapter ("Understanding pragmatics – Summary and outlook"), as suggested by its name, is a summary of the book's contents and provides pointers regarding future developments of the discipline into *emancipatory pragmatics*.

The structure of the book reflects the author's avowed intention of discussing pragmatics in light of other disciplines: accordingly, each chapter is devoted to the relationship between pragmatics and another discipline in the humanities. The introduction presents what will be a guiding thread through the book in the form of an anecdote illustrating what pragmatics is about (a case of misunderstanding the author experienced in 1982 as he was doing field research with the Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea). I am mentioning this because the conclusion of each chapter specifies in what respect what has been discussed in the chapter is relevant for that initial anecdote, which proves to be an inventive device

ensuring cohesion within and across chapters. Furthermore, all chapters contain an exercise section at the end, of between 4 and 9 exercises, many of which involving field assignments, from video-recording to participative observation and inquiry. Senft's prose is clear and concise, thus contributing to the readability of the manuscript. A handful of minor typos remain in a few quotes, and these should be corrected in further re-editions. All chapters are also complemented with a quite extensive list of suggested readings related to the topic of the chapter. In what follows I give a brief summary of each chapter.

Chapter one ("Pragmatics and philosophy") traces the roots of modern pragmatics in the philosophical inquiry of meaning, drawing on [Austin's \(1962\)](#), [Searle's \(1969\)](#) and [Grice's \(1975\)](#) contributions to the field. Senft explains how pragmatics focuses on what language users do when they communicate: from this perspective, pragmatics is the study of the performance of speech acts and their contextual constraints. Focus is set on the contractual nature of these communicative acts, which, following [Seuren \(2009\)](#), can be considered to build accountability relations. Seen in this light, pragmatic competence is fundamentally linked to the knowledge of social norms that govern human communicative interactions.

Chapter two ("Pragmatics and psychology") deals with some psychological phenomena assumed to play an important role in the success of communication, focused on here as a means of representing reality. The topic of deixis (how languages provide their users with formal systems by which they can refer to reality) is thus discussed in detail, illustrated with the specific spatial deictic system of Kilivila, a language spoken in Papua New Guinea. The second half of the chapter is devoted to the study of gestures in communication and of their functions in the conveyance of information and the signalling and creation of social bonds.

Chapter three ("Pragmatics and human ethology") considers the expressive function of communicative signals more broadly (such as eyebrow flashes, posture and body motion). By showing how widespread such communicative behaviour is among different cultures, Senft provides details on how relationships can be expressed, modelled and specifically ritualised through interaction, thereby increasing the level of predictability of human interaction. This functional perspective on the multimodality of expressive behaviour also incorporates a solid reflection on the universality of human communicative behaviour.

Chapter four ("Pragmatics and ethnology") pursues the line of reflection introduced in the previous chapters by discussing the relevant input of anthropology and ethnology in pragmatic inquiry. Focusing on phatic communication (i.e., the bonding function of communicative exchanges), Senft shows how shared cultural knowledge is necessary to understand the social bonds between language users and consequently asserts the inherently contextual embeddedness of human interaction. The second half of the chapter consists of an informed discussion of linguistic relativity, reviewing classical positions and providing pointers to a more contemporary and up-to-date overview of the debate.

Chapter five ("Pragmatics and sociology") reminds us of the sociological roots of the study of face-to-face interaction with an insightful and detailed discussion of Goffman's pioneering work on human interaction. Interactions are depicted as ritual forms of communication, regulated by procedures and conventions which are culture-specific. Moving towards ethnomethodology and conversational analysis (cf. [Garfinkel, 1967](#); [Sacks et al., 1974](#)), Senft presents how conversations can be described and analysed as highly structured and ordered activities in which meaning is co-constructed.

In Chapter six ("Pragmatics and politics"), Senft reflects upon the political significance of communication by addressing the specificities of language varieties as vehicles of social identity, thereby practically equating pragmatics with sociolinguistics. In this way, verbal interactions come to be assessed in terms of the ideologies they help create, reproduce or propagate. In this last chapter the author is thus concerned not with the content of verbal exchanges, but with information of ideological significance that, although neither explicitly nor implicitly coded, is conveyed alongside the proper meanings of utterances.

### 3. Critical evaluation and discussion: strengths and weaknesses

Within academic programmes in language and linguistics, this textbook will be particularly valuable to teachers of pragmatics who wish to stress the cultural and social features of verbal interactions for three main reasons: (i) it explicitly discusses the contribution of pioneering research in different disciplines which systematically came to be incorporated in pragmatic research over the years, while pointing out their limitations at the same time; (ii) its approach to pragmatic research from a resolutely interactional, cultural and social perspective is quite useful to clearly situate the pragmatic programme in the academic landscape devoted to the study of social interaction; (iii) as it contains many examples and illustrations pertaining to the linguistic systems of different non-Western languages (Kilivila, Kuna, Korean, etc.), the textbook provides a wealth of linguistic data extremely relevant for illustrative purposes, reminding us that much can be learned from them. Elsewhere on the academic spectrum, I suspect this textbook will also be useful as a resourceful companion in curricula in sociology, ethnology, ethology and anthropology which are concerned with linguistic practices.

The exercise section at the end of each chapter can also be praised as a valuable resource for teachers. The different assignments described by Senft have the advantage of engaging students, sometimes directly, and promise to fuel interesting and stimulating in-class discussions. Perhaps some pointers as to how these exercises should be conducted and indications about expected outcomes would be useful to complement the textbook and to assist the instructor – perhaps in the form of access-restricted online appendices.

Finally, this textbook is adequately challenging for students in terms of its theoretical import. By this I mean that the discussions presented in the different chapters are intellectually stimulating not only from an epistemological perspective but also from a methodological and a theoretical one. This is definitely something worth noting: core issues in the study of verbal communication (e.g. linguistic relativity, *deixis*, meaning, universalism vs. conventionalism or contextualism) are presented in detail, and even if Senft does not formulate definite solutions, his textbook gives very helpful directions for further reflection and successfully promotes awareness of some fundamental issues in pragmatics.

I now turn to what I identify as the one weakness of this book, which I believe has to do with the concept of meaning it adopts – and of how it can be investigated. In Senft's textbook, the concept is restricted to the social, cultural and interactional aspects of communicative meaning. The book takes an interactional and conventionalistic stance in its conception of pragmatics, which is in sharp contrast with an alternative mechanistic, cognitive-linguistic conception of pragmatics concerned with the many questions raised by the way explicit and implicit meaning is cognitively processed. As a consequence, it completely overlooks some other equally lively and strong research trends in the field, related to linguistic pragmatics and stemming from the inferential tradition, such as neo- and post-Gricean *cognitive pragmatics* (in the vein of Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2012),<sup>1</sup> and *experimental pragmatics* (see e.g. Noveck & Sperber, 2004; Meibauer & Steinbach, 2011) among others. Yet, given the general title of the book and its back cover (which presents it as an introduction to *linguistic pragmatics*), we would have been licensed to expect a general overview of all areas of pragmatic. The absence of certain trends in pragmatics from its contents thus comes as a surprise.

Equally telling in this respect is the choice of contents of Chapter two, devoted to the relationships between pragmatics and psychology. It certainly makes sense to tackle *deixis* as a window into the mental construal of the world for purposes of representation, as it is concerned with how language users represent spatial and temporal information with respect to the speech situation. However, devoting half of a chapter on psychology to gestures seems like a less obvious choice than opting for traditional psycholinguistic phenomena involved in communication or other more psychologically marked research topics. While I do not question the importance of gesture research, other candidates would have seemed more relevant to discuss the links between psychology and pragmatics. This choice seems to confirm the general orientation of the book, which neglects the notion of inference. Additionally, and to the extent that inference is at the core of many contemporary approaches to pragmatics, its absence from the contents of the book remains somewhat surprising.<sup>2</sup>

I shall nevertheless highlight that despite this notable omission, the book provides relevant material for fundamental theoretical discussions such as the tension between the description of language diversity and the possibility of a universalistic account. Although Senft does not pretend to settle these discussions, his textbook encourages further reflexion, and accordingly – though perhaps sometimes indirectly – constitutes a valuable resource for anyone interested in the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of pragmatic research.

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<sup>1</sup> To take an example, research within or related to Relevance Theory is nowadays extremely prolific: the Relevance Theory Online Bibliographic Service compiled by Francisco Yus from the University of Alicante, Spain (<http://personal.ua.es/francisco.yus/rt.html>) lists over 4000 different entries (talks and publications) of scholarly work related to this framework. And yet, the only reference to Relevance Theory in Senft's textbook is an entry in the 'suggested readings' section at the end of Chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> In comparison, other introductions to pragmatics available on the market (e.g. Huang, 2007; Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996; Archer et al., 2012; Chapman, 2011) discuss both issues related to interaction and issues related to inference and linguistic meaning (presupposition, implicature, reference, etc.). The absence of the latter in Senft's book can thus be seen as denoting a restricted understanding of pragmatics, devoid of any concern for the role of inferential processing in communicative exchanges.

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