Book Review: Defining Pragmatics
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What is This?

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In a preface to her book, Ariel highlights the diachronic difficulty in defining pragmatics along a grammar/pragmatics axis, leading to the establishment of influential pragmatic schools which she has christened ‘big-tent pragmatics’. *Defining Pragmatics* then has nine chapters, divided into four broad parts: an introductory chapter (‘What’s Under the Big-Tent Pragmatics’), Part I (‘Deconstructing Pragmatics’), Part II (‘Reconstructing Pragmatics’) and Part III (‘Mapping the Big-Tent Pragmatics’).

In the introductory chapter, Ariel presents a preliminary picture of the foci of pragmatic researchers and the importance of pragmatic phenomena in society, and surveys the birth of ‘big-tent pragmatics’ through the explorations of problem solvers and border seekers. She proposes to define pragmatics through the code/inference criterion, a yardstick that rejects a topic-based practice of pragmatics, having found existing definitional approaches wanting.

The two chapters in Part I are committed to examining 10 criteria utilized in the literature in defining pragmatics. Ariel divides the criteria into three groups: a) meaning, b) analytical and c) cognitive criteria. She objectively accounts for the conception and principles of the theories without critical judgements at this level: meaning criteria consider pragmatic meaning as context-dependent, non-truth conditional, and implicit and secondary; analytical criteria define pragmatics with respect to discourse units, extra-grammatical accounts, acceptability judgements and naturalness; and cognitive criteria work on pragmatics as relating to performance, right hemisphere specialization and inference. Problematicizing the criteria, the author argues that the grammar/pragmatics distinction does not lie in being respectively context-insensitive or context-sensitive, as the two criss-cross; that both pragmatics and grammar could contribute to truth conditionality, making the distinction unsustainable; that it cannot be consistently demonstrated that pragmatic meaning is implicit and secondary, as some grammatical elements do the same; that ‘inferential pragmatic phenomena may be grammatical and grammatical phenomena may be extragrammatical’ (p. 75); that acceptability judgements cannot be sustained as they fail intuition tests; that performance is not an exclusive pragmatic property; that not all grammatical/pragmatic outputs can be distinguished by the right hemisphere specialization arguments; and that inference cannot be sustained all the way as a strictly pragmatic tool.

Having rejected all the criteria as mostly canon-based and pre-emptive of pragmatic engagements, in Part II Ariel reconstitutes the grammar/pragmatics distinction by defending the candidacy of a code/inference criterion. She appeals to the innovativeness of inferences, non-automation of successful inferential communication, deniability of inferences, the indirect nature of inferences, and optionality of enriching linguistic codes, all of which may occur conversely with respect to coded meaning. She identifies three inference-based pragmatic theories: Gricean, neo-Gricean and Relevance theories, defining ‘a theory of pragmatics [as] a theory about pragmatic inferencing in the service of linguistic communication’ (p. 120). While all the theories ‘define grammar as a set of codes and pragmatics as inference’ (p. 120), account for the same set of inferences, albeit...
sometimes differently, and draw the grammar/pragmatics distinction the same way, they differ in their application of Grice’s maxims.

Having established that defining pragmatics is impossible with canonized topics, Part III applies the code/inference criterion. Ariel submits that classical pragmatic topics such as deixis and reference, speech acts, meaning determination, presupposition, intonation, topicality and discourse structure, and implicatures and explicated inferences are both pragmatic and grammatical; that while functional syntax is essentially placed with pragmatics, several aspects of it have grammatical applications; and that particular topics such as politeness, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics belong to both grammar and pragmatics domains. Finally, Ariel comments on the difficulty in distinguishing grammar from pragmatics and the problem with Occam’s razor, the grand design behind grammar and behind pragmatics, the quantitative availability of grammar and pragmatics, and the status of grammatical pragmatics. She concludes by recommending further research on the code/inference distinction and pragmatic inferences, the interaction between codes and inferences and ‘a reexamination of the methodology for drawing the grammar/pragmatics division of labour’ (p. 273).

Defining Pragmatics is an excellent review of definitions of pragmatics and a state of the art, critical, representation of the field. Its major strength and distinction inhere in its introduction of the code/inference yardstick that has not only been able to delineate pragmatics, but has also been able to set pragmatics apart from other context-exploiting linguistic disciplines such as sociolinguistics, stylistics and discourse analysis. The same tool presents a more systematic and acceptable settlement of the differences between neo-Gricean and Relevance theorists, the proposal of Saul (2002) being controversial (see Carston, 2005). The author masterfully gradates her theoretical engagements with the same topics across the different sections of the book with no banal repetitions.

However, in discussing Neo-Gricean pragmatics, more space is assigned to Levinson’s contributions than those of Horn, and the differences within the group are underdeveloped as if the theorists present a single voice (see Carston, 2005; Horn, 2005). Deixis and reference are taken together, resulting in the former being generalized as indexicals (see Allott, 2010). ‘Beyond Pragmatics’, a chapter in Part III, seems confusing as the extra-pragmatic state, prior to Ariel’s book, seems truer for interactional patterns, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics than for politeness. This makes the heading rather broad.

Defining Pragmatics is an authoritative pragmatics text which has properly seated pragmatics in linguistic studies. It presents an unprecedented coherent pragmatic programme, which can be conveniently fleshed out from existing pragmatics texts, and which needs full development for further systematicity. Professional pragmatists and other linguists should therefore find the text an invaluable working tool.

References