Defining Pragmatics

What is Pragmatics? “Hardly a well-integrated field of research” suggests van Dijk (2009:13). Hard to coherently define, it might be regarded as the wastepaper basket of linguistics, receiving anything grammar throws away. So how do we determine clearly where grammar ends and pragmatics begins, and is it possible to redefine pragmatics coherently? This is what Mira Ariel’s monograph Defining Pragmatics aims to do. In this ground-breaking book, Ariel deconstructs the field of pragmatics and demonstrates how it can be reconstituted on a code versus inference distinction as a basis for a grammar/pragmatics divide. She proposes that some classical pragmatic phenomena turn out pragmatic and others actually turn out grammatical. According to Ariel, linguistic phenomena routinely involve both grammatical (coded) and pragmatic (inferred) aspects. With creative ideas and convincing arguments, this book deserves the attention of anyone who is interested in pragmatics.

After a short preface outlining Ariel’s research goal, this volume consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 serves as a good introduction, providing readers with a general background about pragmatics. Ariel first reminds readers of the kinds of questions pragmatists address themselves to: “pragmatics is said to analyze the relationship between grammatical products (most notably, sentences) and their extralinguistic contexts” (p. 3) and shows the prevalence and importance of so-called pragmatic phenomena in human communication. She then goes on to present an elegant and convincing explanation of how big-tent pragmatics was born. Although, on the face of it, pragmatics is an established field with dedicated journals, Levinson’s canonical textbook (1983) and a regular conference since 1985, Ariel argues that the selection of pragmatic topics is “based on family resemblance between them, rather than on a well-defined criterion or a set of criteria defining what pragmatics is” (p. 11), which necessitates what she proposes to call the ‘big-tent’ approach to pragmatics. In Ariel’s opinion, however, this big-tent pragmatics fails to resolve the question of just what pragmatics is, and is in fact simply an unconsummated marriage between the ‘problem solver’ and the ‘border seeker’. The problem solvers focus on what formal grammar very clearly cannot deal with, while border seekers aim to draw a grammar/pragmatics division of labor in relation to different cognitive capabilities. Both partners are paying lip service to this union and the field stays highly fragmented. Finally, Ariel puts forward her optimistic argument that the two practices can be compatible if a single code/inference criterion is chosen and applied consistently to the big-tent range of topics, which is where her book Defining Pragmatics aims to take us.

Chapters 2 and 3 make up Part I, Deconstructing pragmatics, dealing with the theoretical foundation on which pragmatics is said to be distinct from grammar. Chapter 2 provides a survey of ten multiple-criteria definitions for pragmatics. Ariel offers a clear and accessible review of these criteria by classifying them into three groups as follows: three meaning oriented ones including context dependence, non-truth conditionality, implicit and secondary meaning; four analytic ones consisting of discourse units, extragrammatical accounts, acceptability judgments and naturalness; and three cognitive ones dealing with performance, right-hemisphere specialization and inference. While working through each criterion, Ariel highlights early pragmatic researchers’ contributions and adopts examples used by them to argue for a particular grammar/pragmatics division of labor, which gives the reader the authentic flavor of the discipline’s theoretical foundations. In the remainder of this chapter, Ariel shows with examples how these ten criteria, which were never all simultaneously presented by one and the same researcher, often overlap with each other.

Chapter 3 problematizes the three groups of ten criteria respectively based on relevant research providing counterexamples to them. Ariel demonstrates that all the criteria fail to achieve the desired delimitation of big-tent pragmatics and grammar in that many are too weak, and even the relatively strong ones “are not consistent in delimiting what is currently taken as uncontroversially pragmatic” (p. 56). Chapters 2 and 3 complement each other nicely, with Chapter 2 totally focusing on surveying the main points of the criteria and Chapter 3 on criticizing them, which helps the reader grasp the issues clearly. Any reader, whether new to pragmatics or familiar with this field, will find this chapter informative and a good contextualization for the proposal of the code/difference criterion in Part II of the book.

Chapters 4 and 5 form Part II, which is devoted to reconstituting pragmatics on new foundations. Chapter 4 mainly defends the code/inference criterion as a basis for distinguishing grammar from pragmatics. Ariel first discusses the “list of
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All in all, *Defining Pragmatics* is an excellent and exciting book. Firstly, although some researchers are against a big-tent approach to pragmatics and want to delineate a coherent field of pragmatic research distinct from grammar (see e.g. Levinson, 1983; Recanati, 2001; Turner, 1999), Ariel’s *Defining Pragmatics* is the first volume to systematically put forward such a coherent research program. Secondly, this book is very well organized, and opens Parts I and II and every chapter with clear introductions addressing the issues to be pursued and concludes with brief summaries. In addition, the eighteen pages of notes provide readers with more background information for relevant topics. Thirdly, Ariel’s perspectives are innovative. I share her argument that a phenomenon cannot be separated into either totally code or totally inference since sometimes a combination of them is suitable, and both codes and pragmatic inferences must be further distinguished. In addition, I agree with her point that codes and inferences interact with each other. According to Ariel, any meeting conveyed by the speaker in a specific context derives from the combination of codes and inferences and yesterday’s inferences often turn into tomorrow’s codes. Ariel indeed does a ground-breaking job in an attempt to distinguish grammar from pragmatics coherently based on her code/inference criterion and applies it to the complete range of pragmatic phenomena in a broad sense. This criterion can unify the pragmatic field, which is its advantage. However, at the same time, this unification...
relies on “an intuitive basis for the code/inference distinction” (p. 210), which is a puzzle the cognitive approach cannot solve. I will conclude this review with Arie Verhagen’s comment on the back cover of this book: “In a masterful confrontation with decades of received wisdom, Mira Ariel redefines the proper task of pragmatics in a simple, crystal-clear way. An essential read.”

References


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