
Reviewed by ROBYN CARSTON, University College London

Pragmatics and grammar is published in the well-known and long-lasting series ‘Cambridge textbooks in linguistics’, known in the discipline as ‘the red series’. Neither original monographs nor coursebooks, the success of this series has shown that there is a place for quite high-level compendia of thought on a particular domain of linguistics with presentation of the author’s own views. This volume by Mira Ariel fits the bill admirably, as it brings together a wide range of different positions on the grammar/pragmatics interface (much of it cutting-edge research), employs a wealth of pertinent utterance examples (virtually all attested), and presents A’s own position on the interface.

At the outset, A claims ‘The fact is our current grammar is often our pragmatics (of the past) turned grammatical’ (xiii), and her aim is both to explain how this happens, how aspects of usage can penetrate language systems and change them, and to ensure that, nonetheless, a clear synchronic distinction between grammar and pragmatics is maintained. Two essential components of her view are that: (i) a key mechanism in language change is that of the ‘salient discourse profile’ of a linguistic form, that is, (roughly) a pattern of usage or discourse function of the form that has become routine and dominant among a community of language users; and (ii) the main locus for the grammar/pragmatics interface is a particular representational level of utterance content in which they both take part—‘what is said’ or ‘what is explicated’—and so the pragmatic inferences that contribute to this content are the ones most likely to lead to semantic/grammatical change.

In Ch. 1, ‘Introduction: Grammar, pragmatics and what’s between them’, A establishes her position on the semantics/pragmatics distinction as a distinction between the meaning delivered by the linguistic code (expression-type meaning) and the meaning derived by defeasible inferential processes guided by presumptions about rational communicative behavior (the code/inference distinction, in brief). A takes the (now fairly standard) view that communication, no matter how linguistically explicit, always requires pragmatic inference. She discusses the distinguishing properties of codes and pragmatic inferences, and outlines several different kinds of pragmatically inferred meanings and some of the mechanisms proposed for generating them. She ends by setting out the two big issues that centrally concern her: (i) how to draw the code/inference distinction, and (ii) how inferences can become coded.

Part 1 (Chs. 2 and 3), ‘Drawing the grammar/pragmatics divide’, focuses on the division of labor between grammar and pragmatics, and the kinds of arguments and evidence that indicate for any given phenomenon of utterance meaning whether it is a matter of grammar (linguistic encoding) or of pragmatic inference, and, if pragmatic, whether it contributes to the proposition explicitly expressed (explicature) or is an implicature. A makes clear that it is often no easy matter to establish a sure answer to these questions. She presents three specific case studies in their full complexity: (i) referring expressions, in particular, definite descriptions; (ii) temporal and causal interpretations of and-conjunctions; and (iii) upper-bounded interpretations of scalar terms, with a specific analysis of most.

In Ch. 2, ‘Distinguishing the grammatical and the extragrammatical: Referential expressions’, A discusses a number of issues concerning the meaning, function, and distribution of referring expressions (names, definite descriptions, pronouns, demonstratives, clitics, and zero forms). She presents her own take on the much disputed semantic/pragmatic status of the existential presupposition associated with definite descriptions. She argues that there is an encoded (hence context-invariant) component, namely ‘givenness’ (of the referent), and a pragmatically inferred (hence cancelable) component, namely speaker commitment to the existence of the referent. While the
details of this analysis (33–44) and of several other analyses in this chapter are intrinsically interesting, more important for the theme of the book is the theoretical point they illustrate: for any regularly occurring form-function correlation, whether it is a stable feature of the code or a recurrent pragmatic inference is something that can be established only by meticulous examination and use of independently established criteria.

Ch. 3, ‘Distinguishing codes, explicated, implicated, and truth-compatible inferences’, reinforces this point and adds the further complicating dimension of pragmatic inferences that might be instances of either implicature or explication (hence truth-conditional). The non-truth-functional meaning of many and-conjunction utterances (e.g. She left him and he started drinking heavily) is a well-studied case in point. Of particular interest in this chapter is A’s discussion of the semantics and pragmatics of most. While everyone agrees that, as for scalar terms quite generally, most encodes a lower bound—‘more than half’—the status of the often assumed upper bound—‘less than all’—is far from clear. Following her earlier work (e.g. Ariel 2004), A argues against the standard scalar-implicature treatment advocated by the neo-Griceans (Laurence Horn, Stephen C. Levinson) and in favor of an account that treats the upper bound as lexically encoded. She has considerable empirical evidence to support this view. On the one hand, she shows that very few occurrences of most implicate (hence communicate) ‘not all’, which would often defeat the speaker’s purpose in using most (e.g. the peace activist’s sticker Most Israelis voted for peace). On the other hand, her experimental work indicates that, when participants are asked about the speaker’s intended meaning (taken as liberally as possible) of an utterance of most of the F or more than half of the F, a significant minority of subjects accept 100% of the F as a legitimate value for more than half of the F, while an absolute majority reject such an interpretation for most of the F. Crucially, this majority is no smaller than the majority rejecting values lower than 51%. A concludes that (i) while an utterance of most of the F semantically encodes an upper bound (‘less than all’), it need not communicate it, and (ii) the fact that an utterance of most of the F may (sometimes) be compatible with a state of affairs in which all of the F is the case is not a matter of lexical semantics but of truth-compatible inference (102–9).

The third possible position on the upper bound is that it is neither a semantic entailment nor an implicature, but a pragmatic inference that affects the explication. A recent version of this position that A does not discuss is that the upper bound is the result of a (frequent) pragmatic modulation of the word most, resulting in a narrowing of its denotation without a specifically ‘not all’ implication. This position on most and scalar terms quite generally is developed within a broader relevance-based account of the prevalent pragmatic adjustment of lexical meaning in context. See, for instance, discussion of the interpretation of most and some in the example Most Americans are creationists and some even believe that the Earth is flat (Noveck & Sperber 2007:191). This version of the explicate position has the advantage that it is compatible with the standard diagnostics (e.g. cancelability) for pragmatic inferences, for example, Most, in fact all, of the students ..., Not only most but all parents ..., and also (I think) with A’s empirical findings. If this is right, the debate on the semantic/pragmatic status of scalar upper bounds is not over yet.

Part 2 (Chs. 4, 5, and 6), ‘Crossing the extralinguistic/linguistic divide’, comprises the bulk of the book and is concerned with how, despite the relative stability and autonomy of the grammar, elements of pragmatically inferred content can ultimately penetrate it and alter it. It is acknowledged that a range of other extralinguistic factors (working-memory constraints, various other cognitive performance factors, and sociocultural norms including politeness) may also have a shaping effect on grammar, but the central focus is on pragmatic inferences.

Ch. 4, ‘Grammar, pragmatics, and arbitrariness’, is a salutary discussion of the question of whether aspects of grammar (including lexicon) are motivated or arbitrary. Coded form-function pairings look arbitrary, but if they are conventionalizations of what were originally pragmatic inferences, they must be motivated. Drawing on extensive crosslinguistic evidence from diachronic linguists (e.g. Traugott & Dasher 2002), A’s position is that each particular instance of language change (grammaticization) is motivated, but the cumulative effect of chains of individually moti-
vated changes obscures this, so that we have synchronic arbitrariness. She herself veers toward the strong position that 'all of grammar is pragmatically motivated' (117) while recognizing that this would be a tough claim to prove.

Ch. 5, ‘All paths lead to the salient discourse pattern’, is the lynchpin of the book, the locus of A's account of how extralinguistic factors can shape the grammar. They cannot do so in any direct, unmediated way. They must first be manifest within the ‘discourse profile’ (or usage profile) for an existing word or grammatical structure, and then, given that the great majority of innovative usages of forms never make a difference to grammar, their association with the form must take on a particular salience (in effect, a frequency and/or utility that makes the usage highly accessible to speaker-hearers). To take a simple example (which has been traced through Middle and Modern English texts), the connective since, originally only temporal, seems to have been often used in contexts where a causal inference was relevant (e.g. Since she finished her Ph.D., she became less stressed), so much so that this usage became particularly salient to interlocutors and was ultimately semanticized (e.g. Since I'm to be your examiner, I can't discuss your thesis now). A presents a range of far more subtle and interesting cases than this one.

Salient discourse profiles/patterns, even those with a high-probability form-function correlation, have a very different status from linguistic conventions, as A emphasizes in a discussion of ‘preferred argument structure’. This is a dominant patterning of the new versus the given (accessible) among verbal arguments (agent, object, indirect object) (55–62). Although there appears to be a statistically highly significant pattern here (across languages), it is not a grammatical rule or convention; it is unproblematically violable in a way that the grammar is not (208). What, in the end, tips a salient usage pattern into becoming an entrenched feature of a language is, perhaps inevitably, left unanswered.

Ch. 6, ‘The rise (and potential fall) of reflexive pronouns’, is a detailed case study of a particular grammatical change, which illustrates the ideas about grammaticization that A has developed in the preceding two chapters: the way in which what are originally pragmatically derived meanings can, via salient discourse profiles, become conventional (encoded) meanings/functions of a grammatical form, and the claim that, while ultimate grammatical conventions may appear arbitrary, each individual local change is pragmatically motivated. Part of the (complex) story turns on emphatic uses of self-forms having a dominant discourse profile of occurrence with marked coreference, which became a grammatical function of the form. Subsequently, that encoding acquired its own salient usage profile in which certain syntactic conditions on coreference obtained, leading to the now familiar grammatical rule for reflexives. Fascinating in itself, this study also demonstrates the challenging interplay of methodologies required in unearthing the history of a grammatical form.

Part 3, ‘Bringing grammar and pragmatics back together’, focuses on the question of which of the various interpretive levels or representations comprising utterance meaning is the one at which the salient discourse patterns are manifest. The focus is on a level of content known as ‘what is said’. This term has, however, been used for at least three different kinds of meaning: (i) the traditional level of minimal, truth-conditional semantic content (of a sentence in a context); (ii) the pragmatically richer, intuitive, truth-conditional content of an utterance, which a hearer takes to have been explicitly communicated (explicature); (iii) the Gricean concept, which lies somewhere between these two, trying to do double duty as both semantic content and component of speaker meaning. Each of these falls under other labels too (e.g. proposition semantically expressed, basic-level meaning, implicature). A is well aware of this morass of usages and does an admirable job of setting out the different views and terminologies. She also provides the clearest and most insightful discussion I have seen on the issue of distinguishing pragmatic inferences that contribute to explicatures from those that produce implicatures (282–92). In a final section, she points out that there are, in fact, several different levels of meaning that can be the basis of speaker-hearer ongoing conversational interactions. They include, on the one hand, cases of strong implicature that are the main point of an utterance, and, on the other, bare semantic content, which a ‘wise guy’ interpreter might focus on, overriding speaker intentions, whether for fun or annoyance purposes. This,
however, is a matter of particular one-off utterances and, as A emphasizes, it is the explicature that houses the salient recurrent discourse patterns that lead to language change. We have here, then, a pleasingly independent justification for the explicature/implicature distinction.

I see two ways in which the unquestionably valuable body of work in this book could be deepened in the future. First, A should more thoroughly integrate it with ideas developed within the emerging field of 'lexical pragmatics' (see e.g. Wilson & Carston 2007). Aspects of it that mesh closely with A's account include: (i) the role of recurrent patterns of pragmatic narrowing, broadening, and metaphorical extension in semantic change; (ii) a possible explicature account of the upper-bounded interpretation of most and other scalar terms, alluded to above; and (iii) the important but little discussed fact that some element of utterance meaning that is semantic (encoded) for one interlocutor might be pragmatically inferred for another. Second, the book would be enriched by locating the story of salient discourse profiles as the gateway to pragmatic impact on grammar within wider current debates on the evolution and development of language(s) (e.g. Christiansen & Chater 2008), and within epidemiological accounts of how representations, including pragmatically inferred ones, may spread through a population and become more or less stable elements of a culture (Sperber 1985, Enfield 2008).

As is evident from the massive reference list at the end of the book, A's coverage of different schools of pragmatics is impressive, including the neo-Griceans (Laurence Horn, Stephen C. Levinson, Yan Huang), relevance theorists (Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson, Robyn Carston), and philosophers working on the semantics/pragmatics interface (Kent Bach, Jonathan Berg, Emma Borg, John Perry, François Recanati). She is meticulous and generous in citing sources and attributing ideas. Her main allegiances are to relevance theory, on the one hand, and to the usage-based school, on the other (Joan Bybee, John W. Du Bois, Bernd Heine, Paul Hopper, Sandra Thompson), approaches that tend not to interact much with each other but are, as she points out, quite compatible, at least in their broad outlines.

While the author index is fine, the subject index is rather poor. I found almost nothing that I looked for there. Words and concepts that play a prominent role in the text but are missing from the index include 'accommodation', 'categorization', 'definite descriptions', 'left dislocation', 'memory (working, short-term)', 'metaphor', 'metonymy', 'modals', 'motivated change', 'polysemy', 'procedural meaning', 'prototypicality', 'referring expressions', 'social norms', 'strengthening', 'subjectivity', and 'topic'. Given the immensely rich and useful content in the book, I strongly recommend that, in the event of reprinting, a revised and fully comprehensive index be provided.

REFERENCES


UCL Linguistics
Chandler House
2 Wakefield Street
London WC1N 1PF, United Kingdom
[robyn.carston@ucl.ac.uk]