Pragmatics: A multidisciplinary perspective


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Louise Cummings draws on analytic philosophy to connect three areas of meaning research: 1) utterance interpretation and its importance for understanding mundane reasoning; 2) the use of informal fallacies in presenting scientific inquiries and how this affects public understanding of science; and 3) acquired and developmental communication disorders. Integrating these disparate research interests, the ten chapters of the book present different facets of contemporary pragmatics. The first four chapters illustrate traditional approaches to the study of linguistic meaning. The material in chapters 5-7 examines how the mind processes pragmatic information, contrasts the systems available for assessing an argument, and presents a close comparison of two definitions of reasoning. The final three chapters look at how findings from pragmatics can be utilized within other intellectual domains.

**Ch. 1 The Multidisciplinary Nature of Pragmatics**: The opening chapter sets up the book’s main claim, that pragmatics is both derived from multiple disciplines and, as a distinct field, also influences multiple disciplines. This chapter reviews three main approaches to meaning in linguistics (speech act theory, implicature theory, relevance theory) and two additional pragmatic concepts (deixis and presupposition) that serve as testing grounds throughout the book.

**Ch. 2. Theories of Meaning**: Based on the three-part classification put forward by Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990), Cummings sets up the categories of “meaning in the mind,” “meaning in the world,” and “meaning in action,” and then shows how the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, neurology, semiotics, and linguistics overlap in the aspects they examine within each of these three zones.

**Ch. 3 Inferences**: This chapter focuses on the human ability to extract implicit information from stated information. Inferences of three types are explored: deductive inferences (most often associated with the fields of logic and semantics), elaborative inferences (usually associated with psychology and AI), and conversational inferences (associated with pragmatics). All three types, however, are shown to play a part in “understanding pragmatic phenomena within a multidisciplinary perspective” (p. 75). The chapter proceeds through a review of syllogism types, work on non-deductive reasoning that has been posited to account for real-world knowledge, and a review of how pragmatic theories approach the ways implicatures are recovered and psychological work has tackled speech act interpretation.

**Ch. 4 Relevance Theory**: The material in this chapter originally appeared in a 1998 issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics*. Cummings first discusses Sperber and Wilson’s work in Relevance Theory, a system that views inferencing as the hearer’s choice of an interpretation that requires the least amount of processing for a given context. Following this, Cummings critiques the analytic and deductive processing that form the basis of Sperber and Wilson's notion of
relevance. Using the same approach by which Hilary Putnam (1981) showed that having logic, mathematics and the empirical sciences as the basis of the positivists’ methods of verification proved to be inadequate to the task of establishing meaning--due essentially to its reductionism--Cummings argues that a form of reductionism also pervades Sperber and Wilson's account. Her objection to this is based on the holistic nature she sees at the base of inferential comprehension.

Ch. 5 Pragmatics and Mind: Cummings asserts that there has been a lack of research involving pragmatics and the study of the mind, and suggests that linguistic pragmatics, especially, can reveal insight regarding the structure of the mind. In particular, due to the “dependence of pragmatic phenomena on wider processes of cognition, pragmatics provides an interesting test case” for one theory, i.e. the modularity of mind thesis (p. 137). After supplying a brief review of four centuries of thought on whether language might reflect the content of the mind (including positions by Leibniz, Hobbes, Fodor, and Chomsky), Cummings evaluates two responses to the modularity of pragmatics— that of Kasher (1991), who claims “that at least a part of pragmatics is modular, and the response of Wilson and Sperber, that pragmatics is essentially non-modular” (p. 137). She concludes that “neither response is acceptable for the reason that these theorists incorrectly assume the tenability of the modular approach to mind” (p. 137). As an alternative to the concept of modularity so prevalent in cognitive psychology, linguistics, and philosophy, Cummings proposes that pragmatic phenomena suggest a model based on Quine’s semantic holism; this would need, in addition, to incorporate the criteria that knowledge be informationally continuous, that every item of knowledge must presuppose further items of knowledge, and that the system of knowledge show plasticity in responding to internal and external factors.

Ch. 6 Argumentation and Fallacies of Reasoning: This chapter contrasts traditional, truth-conditional approaches to argumentation with a pragmatically influenced approach whereby arguments are seen as “using communication theoretic concepts, such as felicity conditions and the performance of speech acts” (p. 163). The chapter then examines argument and fallacy as they are viewed in six frameworks: the logical/semantic criteria of truth conditions; the epistemic framework of knowledge and belief; the dialectical framework used in quotidian dialog; the psychological framework of argument as a mental phenomenon; the rhetorical framework in which claims are accepted or contested by an audience; and the pragmatic framework. The final section of the chapter shows applications of the newer paradigm of argument to discourse on such public health issues as HIV/AIDS and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE)--mad cow disease.

Ch. 7 Habermas and Pragmatics: The content of this chapter originally appeared in Social Epistemology. At issue is the question of what counts as a legitimate system of reasoning. Cummings again makes note of arguments that have been presented against logical positivism, here critiquing the way that German philosopher Jürgen Habermas responded to the narrow definitions of rationality put forward by the positivists when he suggested that rationality should instead be reconceived as communicative competence of speakers. While Cummings applauds Habermas’s emphasis on communication, she finds that it is still insufficient because he does consider how “the pragmatic conditions of his own thinking and theorising” need to fall outside of the account itself (p. 210).
Ch. 8 Artificial Intelligence and Pragmatics: This chapter assesses what insights the fields of pragmatics and AI can offer to each other. Assuming that speakers/222 and hearers’ ability to produce and interpret utterances is constrained by rational principles, this chapter examines whether work in AI can capture the process of utterance interpretation. Cummings suggests four criteria that an AI model must satisfy to be pragmatically valid: syntactic and semantic representations must be affected by pragmatic aspects; knowledge representation must allow different types and amounts of knowledge; reasoning must operate on and derive implicatures from knowledge; and a rationality principle must justify why speakers want to communicate.

Ch. 9 Language Pathology and Pragmatics: Cummings notes the extensive literature on pragmatic disorders: “every pragmatic concept and process that we have examined in this book is investigated … by clinical linguistic studies” (p. 254). She provides an excellent overview of pragmatic pathologies by supplying profile deficits of eight clinical populations: children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI); autism; learning disability; left hemisphere damage; right hemisphere damage; closed-head injury; Alzheimer’s disease; and schizophrenia.

Ch. 10. Beyond Disciplines: The brief final chapter offers a summary of the ways that the book has shown that philosophy, psychology, AI, and language pathology are already interconnected with pragmatics. The book ends by suggesting that presumption and informal logic can contribute to additional disciplines as well, including work in cultural anthropology, game theory, developmental psychology, and neurolinguistics.

Assessment and Conclusions

In contrast to other recent overviews of pragmatics (e.g. Grundy 2000, Huang 2006, Verschueren 1999), Cummings’ book is not set up with exercises for immediate classroom practice; instead, it functions more like Levinson’s seminal survey in contrasting and tying together historical strands of thought, examining explanations for how meaning interpretation works. This book, however, also suggests many new paths whereby pragmatic fields of investigation can be applied to other areas, such as exploring the ability of patients with neurological damage and schizophrenia to use implicature, or discussing how inferences are exploited in scientific reporting. The tone is serious and the base of scholarly research is evident throughout. The familiarity assumed with philosophical theories would make this a tricky first book for many undergraduates studying pragmatics; it does, however, present an excellent choice for readers who want both more historical depth as well as a guide to the current breadth of scholarly work in pragmatics.

References


**Links**

- [Louise Cummings's homepage](#)
- [Pragmatics: A Multidisciplinary Perspective at EUP](#)

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