

A Review of Georgia M. Green's Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding

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PRAGMATICS AND NATURAL LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING. By Georgia M. Green.

Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989; pp.xi+180. \$12.50.

Given the current popularity of rational/goal-based analyses of message production, message comprehension, and discourse coherence, Green's review of the central issues in linguistic pragmatics should find a receptive audience in departments of Speech Communication across the country. Part of Erlbaum's series of tutorial essays in cognitive science, this book manages to provide an overview of the issues clear enough to orient the uninitiated reader and a depth of insight sufficient to hold the interest of a more sophisticated audience. It is cogently argued, includes a wealth of illustrative examples and achieves an economy of style rarely equaled in treatments of similar topics.

As a whole the work reflects a welcome movement away from syntactic and semantic explanations of several important phenomena (e.g., presupposition, reference, literal and metaphorical meaning). Green moves toward an explanation of the phenomena of linguistic communication in terms of the plans, goals, intentions and actions of rational agents. Human inferential capabilities are at the heart of Green's pragmatic communication theory. The chapter by chapter flow of the argument is characterized by an attempt to progressively broaden the legitimate scope of pragmatics.

In the introduction and chapter 1, pragmatics is defined as the study of intentional, goal-directed action. Linguistic pragmatics, more specifically, is directed to explain a speaker's intentional use of linguistic expressions to bring about a specific change in an addressee's mental model of the world. Understanding (to the extent that it occurs at all) depends crucially on the ability of speakers and hearers to infer each other's (often reflexive) beliefs, assumptions, plans and intentions. This

process of reconstructive inference is seen as undeniably indeterminate and fallible, depending heavily on what Green refers to as "guessing." As such, the task of linguistic pragmatics is to describe the framework of assumptions and conventions as well as the logics of inference that result in our guesses being accurate enough most of the time.

Two topics within the traditional scope of pragmatics, indexicality and anaphora, are treated in chapter 2, which convincingly undermines the belief that pragmatics is merely the study of contextual determinants of reference. The central claim is that the meanings of anaphoric and indexical expressions (those that make explicit reference to previous discourse, the speaker, the addressee, present time, place and/or conditions of utterance) are not uniquely determined by the spatio-temporal context of the utterance but by when, where, what or whom "a speaker intends to be referring to" (18). The primacy of the speaker's intention in determining the meaning or reference of a linguistic expression is stressed here and again in subsequent chapters. The point is amply illustrated with examples of pronouns (*I, you, it*), tensed verbs (*is, was, will*), time adverbs (*before, later, yesterday*), and demonstratives (*this, that*) used in contexts that make their precise referents indeterminate except with respect to the speaker's intentions. As Green emphasizes, "ultimately, and most generally, it is what the speaker intends to (be understood to) refer to that determines what a form refers (strictly: is used to refer to) on an occasion of use" (26).

Chapter 3 treats problems of reference more generally, demonstrating that even seemingly "literal" uses of linguistic forms cannot be understood without hearers making reference to a system of pragmatic principles. Drawing repeatedly on Nunberg's pragmatic theory of reference, Green casts grave doubt on the notion that the extension of a linguistic form is a compositional function of its components'

intensions. Instead, it is argued that an addressee's ability to arrive at the intended referent of an expression relies on "the cooperative exploitation of supposed mutual knowledge" (47). The same lexical item may (via homonymy, metaphor, metonymy, etc.) have several different senses (intensions), and none of these alternative senses is privileged over the others. Language users are able to infer the intended referent of a linguistic expression only because their competence includes the ability to recursively apply *referring functions* to locate sensible referents in context. Thus *part-of, student-of, buyer-of*, etc. are possible instances of the referring functions that enable hearers to map from expressions to intended referents. In this light, the hearer's problem is not to guess the intended referent directly but to choose the right referring function. There are principles which constrain this choice, but success depends primarily on the skillful exploitation of supposed mutual knowledge, including assumptions about what is normal, rational, and shared.

The first part of chapter 4 gives a terse introduction to Austin's and Searle's conceptions of speech as action. The chapter lacks any substantive commentary on on felicity conditions, the relations between intentions, expressions and meanings, or the relations between act types and utterance tokens. These issues are covered in more detail in Erlbaum's tutorial essay on the philosophy of mind. It seems clear, therefore, that these issues were omitted from this volume for editorial reasons rather than out of neglect. Still, their absence is consequential.

The chapter does contain a lengthy treatment of the so-called performative hypothesis, which claims that syntactic principles govern the use of performative expressions (e.g., *I order, I promise*, etc.). This section is probably most useful to young linguists, as it exemplifies an argument from syntactic evidence, but its only relevance to the book's larger project is that a pragmatic explanation of performative usage eventually triumphs over its syntactic competitor. In similar

fashion, the remainder of chapter 4 replaces a semantic account of presupposition with a pragmatically grounded alternative.

Using Grice's Cooperative Principle and associated maxims as its primary example, chapter 5 provides a masterful demonstration of how positing a set of shared assumptions and assuming action is in accordance with those assumptions, one can explain myriad instances of language users meaning and understanding more than they actually say or hear. Implicature, going beyond the information given, is perhaps the definitive feature of linguistic communication, and no mode of explanation captures the subtlety and power of this phenomenon better than pragmatics. Far more than merely defining or explaining implicature, this chapter (and the whole book, really) exemplifies the best sort of rigorous pragmatic explanation. The second half of the chapter shows that indirectness, illocutionary force, presupposition, reference, some species of compositionality, and metaphor are all amenable to analysis in terms of implicature.

Chapter 6 on pragmatics and syntax and chapter 7 on conversational interaction are well written and full of useful and accurate information, but they seem to have been added as an afterthought: chapter 6 for linguists, chapter 7 for conversation analysts.

All in all, this is a good and useful book for researchers seeking a concise survey of the most important issues in contemporary linguistic pragmatics. It should also serve well as a text in graduate seminars on pragmatics. However, what is most remarkable about this book, above and beyond its usefulness as an introductory text, is its original and challenging analysis of phenomena outside the traditional purview of pragmatics. Interested communication scholars will certainly benefit from an exploration of the somewhat radical vision of pragmatics articulated here by Green, and for this reason her book is enthusiastically recommended.

