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Book review

**Why Language? What Pragmatics Tells Us about Language and Communication, Jacques Moeschler. De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin/Boston (2021). 246pp. ISBN, 9783110723328, $114.99 (hardcover).**

The study of pragmatics has been traditionally treated as a "waste basket" in linguistics (Bar-Hillel, 1971) or has been primarily centered around the study of speaker meaning (Huang, 2014). Based on the distinction between language and communication, Jacques Moeschler extends pragmatics research to better understand issues and crises in our society. This book is not only written for scholars who study language and communication, but also for general audiences who are interested in these two essential aspects of our everyday interaction.

The author begins with an examination of eight common questionable assumptions about language, seeking to clarify what language is not. For example, languages such as English are often referred to as lingua francas because of their large volume of non-native speakers. The global status of English, however, does not entail that one language is more important than another because there are other factors such as historical accidents that determine the importance of a language. In addition to discussing the problems in these common assumptions, the author revises them into appropriate descriptions of language and its usage (see p. 43).

To build up the core assumption of this book, chapters 2 and 3 postulate that language is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for communication. On the one hand, communication is not language because a) animals can communicate without a language; and b) successful communication requires more than understanding the explicit meaning conveyed by linguistic code (language) but also the implicit meaning inferred based on social code (context). On the other hand, the author rejects the evolutionary hypothesis that language is evolved for communication, suggesting that it is cognition not communication that serves as the primary function of language. In other words, language enables our thoughts to be externalized and communicated to others. Moreover, language structure and language usage are guided by different kinds of rules. Linguistic rules explain the properties of language structure in terms of phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems. In contrast, communication rules, such as the cooperative principle and principles of relevance, explain language use. The central role of relevance in the communication process foregrounds the cognitive nature of language and communication.

Moving away from the cognitive dimension of language, the following three chapters dive into language and society, language and discourse, as well as language and literature, all of which call for more studies in pragmatics. Chapter 4 shows that across different theories of language and communication, the social dimension plays an important role. The pioneering research is Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativism that language partially influences our thinking. Although this hypothesis has been challenged with numerous counterexamples, Moeschler identifies that its persistence stems from the view that (non-literal) meaning is embedded in words, which is often reflected in one's autonomous processing of meaning in metaphors and idiomatic expressions. Moreover, William Labov's sociolinguistic study demonstrates that, along with biological factors, culture also shapes linguistic variations. Brown and Levinson's face-based politeness theory offers a culturally universal account of people's implicit communication. Across these theories, the guiding question is "whether [the social] dimension is anchored in the linguistic code or whether this dimension is linked to language usage." (p. 126) These sociolinguistic studies have shed lights on the camp that favors meaning exchange via linguistic code.

In chapter 5, the author provides a pragmatic account of discourse, suggesting that "discourse is not a property of language structure, but merely a result of language usage" (p. 7). He argues that discourse is neither a linguistic nor a pragmatic unit but a sequence of utterances that needs to be globally interpreted based on the speaker's informative intention. After problematizing prior theories such as cohesion markers and discourse relations, Moeschler puts forward his theory of discourse pragmatics, suggesting that discourse coherence is our ability to form and confirm hypotheses of the other's global informative intention. Discourse can also exert non-propositional effects on people's emotion and propositional effects of persuading others, both of which are integral in language comprehension.

The literary use of language is examined from a relevance theoretical perspective in chapter 6. While figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, irony, and zeugma are traditionally treated as extraordinary language use in rhetoric and stylistics, the author suggests that these literary uses are in fact ordinary language use and that their metaphorical senses are

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independent from their literal meanings. The communicative effects of conventional metaphors are strong, whereas those of creative metaphors are weak and easily cancellable by the speaker's subsequent utterances. Following his differentiation between language and communication, the author also discusses the relationship between narration and communication, suggesting that first-person and third-person narratives are not communication. Furthermore, the relationship between events and people's mental states can be characterized by both the temporal order and the spatial order, in which only the spatial order can represent all possible connections between events and our thoughts.

In chapter 7, drawing on the central concepts of presupposition and implicature in pragmatics, the author postulates superpragmatics to understand verbal communication beyond the speaker's meaning. First, utterance comprehension is influenced by the accessibility of the utterance, which mirrors the Gricean approach that *what is communicated* is a combination of *what is said* and *what is implicated*. Specifically, explicature is considered as the most accessible and entailment is considered as the least accessible because "the latter are covert, or invisible in the communication process" (p. 193). The author suggests that utterance comprehension also depends on its strength in that an utterance can be strongly communicated (e.g., via entailment) or weakly communicated (e.g., via conversational implicature). Examining these linguistic nuances can help readers better understand language and communication in actual social interaction, such as the encrypted and often obscure language in political communication. To end this chapter, the author illustrates the complexity and indeterminacy of meaning conveyed via the metalinguistic negation in the *I am (not) Charlie* movement.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Moeschler highlights that research on language has moved from examining syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in isolation to exploring the interfaces of these basic components of language. Specifically, a better understanding of language and communication lies in the exploration of the semantics-pragmatics interface. The author also envisions that the future trends include topics such as various approaches to the study of language and emotion (notably sentiment analysis), the origin of language, and research that aims to improve the pragmatic aspect of machine translation and human-computer communication.

This book contributes to research on language and language use in at least three ways. First, the author presents eight common misconceptions about language. The discussion of these language myths is particularly helpful for the general audience who are interested in language and its use but are unfamiliar with its scientific study in linguistics. Second, in line with Reboul (2015), the author offers a novel account of language and communication, arguing that language is not primarily used for communication but for externalizing thoughts. Such a perspective forms a sharp contrast with the view that the main function of language is for communication (e.g., Allan, 2020; Ellis, 1999). Moreover, connecting language, cognition, and communication could also prompt more studies to explore the cognitive and emotive aspects of human communication. Finally, building on the essential differences between language and communication, the author extends the study of discourse and pragmatics to more socially meaningful issues, such as politics and technology-mediated communication. The author demonstrates that superpragmatics is a viable approach to analyzing language use in these discourses.

While the author has surveyed a wide range of issues in pragmatics and its neighboring disciplines, the present work mainly discusses language and communication at the level of information exchange. This book would have benefited from research in the North American tradition of Communication Studies, which attends more to the effects of communication on shaping people's attitudes, behaviors, and relationships (e.g., McGlone and Giles, 2011). One notable example is the research on linguistic agency that assigns the agent of a sentence to people (e.g., *humans contract the coronavirus*) or to a pathogen (e.g., *the coronavirus infects humans*). A lot of research has documented the significant effects of this subtle language manipulation on people's changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions in interpersonal and health communication contexts (e.g., McGlone et al., 2013; Ma and Miller, 2021; Wang and McGlone, 2020). Understanding linguistic communication as social actions could help bring tangible benefits to our social lives such as more effective health communication campaigns and better management of interpersonal relationships.

In conclusion, this book offers an updated account of language and its usage from a relevance theoretical perspective, providing a timely update to the continental school of pragmatic research that treats pragmatics as a perspective (Verschueren, 1999). Readers could benefit from its discussions on the common myths of language, the difference between language and communication, and the study of language use beyond speaker meaning in societal issues.

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