

MICHAEL PERKINS. *Pragmatic impairment*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. (xii, 230)

The discipline that came to be known as linguistic pragmatics gained considerable steam by the middle seventies. While no single conception of the term gained consensus, the primary element was the notion that pragmatics involved meanings that depend on the speakers-hearers and the utterance situation, not the conventional propositional content in itself. While this is not the scope of *Pragmatic Impairment*, the element of communication in a 'situation' has been borrowed, along with the term *pragmatics*, in the fields of language development and speech pathology. For some writers in the field, this *pragmatics* has become "isolable and distinct" from language (9), although others see language as occupying a central place in human communication. In any case, the understanding that signaling and its recognition cannot occur exclusive of each other (48) entails the primacy of *situation* in communication. This text investigates and reports on work in those fields whose objects have in common situational manifestations of the communication or response of the impaired subject.

Grice's Cooperation Principle and Maxim of Relevance do seem to provide an important means of observing when and where communication goes wrong, since the Maxim of Relevance must be satisfied for communication to be successful (21). About the following example,

- A. I love you
- B. And I'm the sugar plum fairy

it misses the point to say, "Maxims may be broken in order to trigger 'implicatures'" (17). It is not the breaking of any maxim, or any intentionality to do so, but the sum of the effects of the intact maxims that leads to the unmistakable implication in B's remark. In particular, B responds with a patent falsehood, which, conjoined by "and" to A's proposition, when interpreted as

relevant to it, must be interpreted as equally truthful, and B's utterance is therefore adequately informative. Unimpaired speakers know from an early age how to work out this kind of communication, which underscores the vital importance of the Maxim of Relevance in observing and diagnosing a range of cognitive deficits. Thus Relevance Theory and the Principle of Relevance have become recognized as descriptions of important tools in text processing tasks.

Apprehending what a speaker means or wants, in addition to the mere decoding of linguistic signs, is the result of a cognitive activity. An excellent example of this may be made from Figure 2.1 (20) which shows an autistic child's response to the request *write the days of the week in the seven boxes* inscribed on a sheet of paper: the words 'The' – 'days' – 'of' – 'the' – 'week', each word written in one of the boxes. The child's receptive skills, i.e., word recognition (week vs. weak), his grammatical and lexical decoding faculty was evidently present, his literacy skills, i.e., grapheme production and spelling, were equal to the task, he clearly *understood what the therapist said*, but just as clearly he did not *work out what the therapist wanted* — that seven days make one week, that seven boxes were provided on the paper, thus *write the days of the week in these seven boxes* called for the name of each day to be written in a discreet box. It is this essential working out of the utterance in the speech situation by manipulating the Principle of Relevance in the communication situation, or its failure, that exposes the operation of the cognitive faculty and its disruption.

The point is prominently made that abnormal pragmatic behavior may significantly aid our understanding of what is amorphously understood as 'normal' pragmatic functioning (Ch 1). This claim is hard to argue against, but it is also hard to support. On the one hand, focusing analytic instruments on the point of deficit, as in the work with conversation analysis to study the communication of aphasics, can highlight, for insightful observers, the highly elaborate,

sophisticated, and skilled deployments of linguistic and other communicative means in normal human interactions, although it is not clear that these could not be observed in normal communication situations. On the other hand, our conception of what is aberrant is formed primarily from intuitions about what is normal, so the conception is somewhat circular

In passing it could be pointed out that those who believe that language and cognition constitute distinct faculties may have their understanding improved by reference to literature cited in Chapter 3. In Transcript 4.3 and 4.4 (54) a child age 4:10 uses her fingers to tap out the rhythm of what is reported as her syllable timed speech. Given the cognitive and neurological complexity of rhythmic production and maintenance during speech, the so-called processing overload theory does not seem helpful. But something is going on with her productions. In another Transcript (4.5) a nine year old boy whose difficulty finding words (“reduced linguistic encoding”) (ibid.) is said to “create excessive inferential burden” on interlocutors (55).

It is certainly true, as the author states, that we are yet far from being able to “specify with any confidence the degree of coexistence of” neural events, cognitive activities, and behavior that indexes them (14). This is highly relevant for diagnosis and prognosis, and therapeutic interventions, as the aforementioned example (writing “the days of the week” in boxes) demonstrates. Linguistic and discourse analysis tools offer means to detect not only obvious or prominent deficits, but the development of remarkably skillful accommodations and discourse markers which serve communicative functions, made by, for example, aphasics (28). These frameworks help isolate precisely where the deficit lies, while at the same time revealing, to the observer prepared to notice them, the sophisticated deployment of discourse operations present in impaired and normal speakers. In any case, though, it is not at all clear that a normal

range for such faculties as the ability to process according to the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, or what constitutes the acceptable range of inferential burden, can be quantified.

The discussion of “Inference” (72 ff) conflates logical inference and entailment with grammatical decoding. The conventional references of pronouns, “the phone rang — he picked it up” is rule governed, i.e., by ‘rule’ we connect the singular neuter pronoun to the singular neuter noun that is the topic of the preceding utterance in the context, a principle that accounts for our sensation of confusion when such items as pronouns are misused. This is a property of *language*. The entailments available for ‘forget’ and ‘believe’ (e.g., forgetting *someone called* vs. believing *someone called*) are likewise the products of conventional semantics. We do not work these out pragmatically, by inference, we decode them, a virtually automatic process. Since *inferential processing* is an important concept in the field, it is vital to distinguish what belongs to language and what to the speech situation in order to see what is going on with the subjects of observation, as we can see with the child who accurately *decoded* the therapist’s linguistic production perfectly, *write the days of the week in the seven boxes*, but who could not work out *inferentially* what the therapist wanted.

Throughout this text the position is taken that pragmatic impairment is an “emergent” phenomenon, “the product of many interacting variables” (176); this conception puts the study on the right track. The cover definition of *pragmatic impairment* emerges here as the reduction of communicative choices, and through this lens is viewed literature about communication-related phenomenon associated with conditions ranging from right hemisphere damage, traumatic brain injury, autism, Williams syndrome, the effects of cleft palate, lack of access to lexemes, and the surgical removal of a portion of the tongue. Effects associated with all of these satisfy this conception.

In the case of the latter two, however, the limitation results from organic impairment and is accommodated by most speaker-hearers after a brief calibration period during which the phonetic recoding is worked out, a process which is not dissimilar to constructing a dialect correspondence. Taken from this standpoint, the compass of the concept has become a catch all. In fidelity to the original of the concept that names the field, where significant deficits occur, all roads lead to cognitive or neurological dysfunction.

This text is of interest to students of language development, communicative disorders, speech therapy, child development, and K – 12 teachers, who have the opportunity to observe such problems and refer subjects for assessment and intervention. The book provides an excellent survey of relevant literature and offers detailed discussion of many pertinent issues.

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