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Book Review



Pragmatics Online, Kate Scott. Routledge: New York (2022), ix +168 pp.

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1. Introduction

Pragmatics, an important field in linguistics, concerns how people use language in context. In recent years, with the development of technology and the outbreak of COVID-19, people have tended to use video-conferencing technology to study and work more often than before. Therefore, it is hard to ignore online communication. Given the situation, the author of this book, Kate Scott, tries to reveal how people apply resources and strategies to decode messages in online contexts and then realize communication – based on speech act theory and relevance theory. Kate Scott believes that although contexts are different, communicative acts are performed by a human being, and the underlying mechanisms remain the same online as offline, which forms a basic assumption of this book. Besides, the whole content is divided into eight chapters, with only one topic in each chapter. Through the delicate organization of structure, readers can capture the features of language online and understand the communication behaviors in digital contexts.

As a leading part, Chapter 1 is an overview of the whole content of this book. It includes the introduction of theoretical frameworks and the comparison of different contexts. To be more specific, the author analyzes online materials mainly based on Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle 1965, 1969) and Relevance theory (Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2012; Clark 2013), and then interprets the differences among various online platforms and that between online and offline, guided mainly by the theoretical

framework proposed by Baym (2010). The detailed explanation of theoretical frameworks and the introduction of the following chapters lay a solid foundation for the analysis of acts later.

Chapter 2 discusses how people tailor their language for unknown audiences and navigate unpredictable discourse contexts. Different from offline communication, where individuals can organize and interpret language according to each other's background information, facial expressions, and other factors. The identities of communicators in digitally mediated environments are uncertain, which leads to a new concept, mentioned by the author, context collapse. It means that one's message can be reached by different kinds of people. For example, when you post an update on Facebook, your Facebook friends, including your colleagues, family members, and other friends from various parts of your life, can all see the post. In this way, the internet brings people from different backgrounds into one space, forming this complex situation – context collapse. This raises a question about how speakers achieve the communicative goal of speaking to members with different contextual assumptions. The author talks about this question mainly based on the theory proposed by Tagg et al. (2017). They identify seven elements that users think will be considered when they post a message online, containing Participants, Online media ideologies, Site affordances, Text type, Identification processes, Norms of communication, and Goals. Among

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these elements, participants, the main factor that influences people's organization of language, are discussed from aspects of different kinds of imagined audiences and the anonymous state of speakers. Then, the author points out the strategies speakers use to deal with context collapse by exemplifying ideas of previous works, like applying the second person noun *you*, addressing sub-groups within the audience, and using if-clauses (Frobenius, 2014), using a common language and non-linguistic resources, and compartmentalizing social media presence (Androutsopoulos, 2014) to name a few.

Moreover, the author emphasizes that hearers need to assume that speakers are performing two ostensive acts when they send messages – saying and showing, and then interpret the utterances from a relevance-theoretical perspective. When people use the strategies mentioned before to realize communication, the boundary between privacy and publicity is often blurred. Although many digital companies, such as Twitter and Facebook, are seeking ways to solve this problem, there is still a long way to go. When individuals conduct online communication activities, they should also think about how to use strategies properly to avoid context collapse and protect their privacy.

When readers come to Chapter 3, the author begins to discuss one particular act- sharing. She discussed how sharing functions as an act of communication and how people understand acts of sharing online. In this chapter, the author focuses on one particular type of sharing – rebroadcasting, which is the act of sharing existing, usually third-party content with other online users in your online social network (Scott, 2021). However, this chapter deals with why users are willing to share. Regarding this issue, the author mainly applies the research of d Boyd et al. (2010), which studies why Twitter users choose to retweet and concludes that rebroadcasting is an intentional act of communication. For further discussion on such communication from the perspective of relevance, the author leads with two new concepts; descriptive and attributive uses of language. Descriptive uses of language mean speakers describe the world from their perspective, while attributive use of language refers to something that has been said by the speaker before or that others said or thought. Rebroadcasting, a kind of quotation, can be regarded as a type of attributive clause, thus becoming the main concern. According to Wilson and Sperber (2012), attributive uses of language realize relevance by informing the audience of the attributed thought, communicating the speaker's attitude towards utterances that are being attributed, showing the addressee that she has heard the original utterance, or managing the social interactions in some way. Then the author tells readers how to understand acts of sharing or rebroadcasting more specifically by combining different kinds of attributive uses of language with the motivations behind why users rebroadcast. At last, the author also mentions "liking", a button on social media, as a kind of sharing. In this chapter, the author adopts many scholars' ideas and examples collected from Twitter and Facebook to justify sharing as

an act of communication and discuss how people interpret it, making the statement convincing and accessible.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to another act – the *hashtag*, which is represented as "#". At first, readers are introduced to the history of the *hashtag*, including the inventor, innovation process, and its original function. Then, the author applies the Systemic Functional Linguistics, proposed by Halliday (1978), and the study by Zappavigna (2015, 2018), which tells readers how to analyze and categorize hashtags based on the experiential and interpersonal metafunctions, to analyze the pragmatic function of hashtags. When hashtags are used as topics, they can provide contextual information to aid interpretation, like presenting details of what the tweet is about and linking tweets with the same topics together. In this way, *hashtag* is performing experiential metafunction. However, when users communicate their attitudes or emotions, like #overjoyed, they perform interpersonal metafunction. After learning about the history of the hashtag and its pragmatic functions, the author has presented the roles hashtags play in communication – a hyperlink, highlight devices, and clues. Through these roles, hashtags can lead audiences to the background of the message, focus their attention on the tag, and guide their inferential process, which means deriving both explicates and implicatures. Besides, the author also discusses the differences in frequency of use and the dominant functions between online *hashtags* and offline ones. At last, the author mentions a special type of tagging – user tags, which means referring to other users by using "@". In summary, chapter 4 presents readers with a relatively comprehensive picture of the development of *hashtags*, the relationship between *hashtags* and pragmatic functions, and the way it realizes the communicative function by representing and analyzing materials reached mainly from Twitter.

In offline communication, people can use various social cues, like gestures, body language, intonation, and facial expressions, to accomplish communication. Then do people also have such non-verbal resources to help them express their ideas in a digitally mediated environment? Chapter 5 will give readers an answer. In this chapter, the author mainly talks about two types of non-verbal resources, which are elements in text representation and image-based resources, and the ways they communicate meanings. In the text presentation, the author lists several ways which can be used to express meanings, including underlining, italicization, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. For example, people use non-standard spelling, usually repetition of letters, to emphasize their emotions at the moment. Furthermore, Darics (2013) points out that repetitions can contextualize the discourse by signaling informality and friendliness as well as performing the phatic function. The next section introduces image-based resources, such as emoticons, emojis, and reaction gifs, among which emoticons and emojis are the key points. Not only the history of them but also the relations between them and facial expressions and their functions are presented. Similar to the non-verbal materials we mentioned above, emoticons and emojis can also strengthen the attitudes and emotions of the speaker. Except this, they can also be taken as illocutionary force indicators, representing propositional

meaning and expressing irony and sarcasm. As social cues are used offline, such non-verbal resources are also context-sensitive, meaning individuals have to interpret the speaker's intended meaning based on the environment in which it occurs. This also reminds readers that the author's analysis based on the materials collected from Twitter and Facebook may be inappropriate when analyzing other languages or materials from other platforms.

Chapter 6 is about a new term called a *meme*. In this chapter, the author mainly talks about *memes* based on previous works and how they express meaning by analyzing examples. In the leading paragraph, an example is used to elaborate on the concept of *memes* and some of their basic features. They are multimodal, combining text with images, easily edited and adapted, and spread quickly and widely. Then, the author gives a comprehensive description of the history of *memes*. According to Shifman (2014), a theoretical basis that the author follows in this chapter, an *internet meme* is a group of digital items sharing common characteristics and it is created to be transformed intentionally. The group of items is referred to as a *meme*, while individual items added to the group by posting are called *meme tokens*. According to this definition, the author points out that memes are communicative in nature for the act of sharing, which has been discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, *memes* are usually used to express experiences and values, involving cultural references and humor, so they can also function as social bonding. Following the author's introduction, three common types of *memes*, namely Twitter hashtag micro-memes, phrasal templates, and image macros, are put under the spotlight. Based on these three types, the author analyzes the process of realizing communication through *memes*. For example, in realizing the communicative functions of image macros, people have to understand the resemblance among meme tokens and the resemblance between *meme* content and the state of affairs in the real world. To explain this clearly, the author also applies two typical *memes* called "Socially awkward penguin" and "Success kid". The last part is the metaphor that lies in memes. The author discusses this question along with a detailed analysis of an object-labeling meme called "Distracted Boyfriend," a sub-category of image macros. As the author concludes, objects in images can be regarded as metaphors because the objects stand for all things that have the same characteristics as them. When people interpret such *memes*, they need to conceptualize the information on the *memes*, establish assumptions about *memes* and then find the connections between *memes* and the intended meaning they are going to express. In this chapter, typical examples are used constantly to help explain what a *meme* is and how people communicate through it, making this part interesting and straightforward.

When readers come to chapter 7, *clickbait* becomes the main concern. In this chapter, readers will learn what *clickbait* is and how it attracts people to achieve its purpose. According to the author, *clickbait* refers to headlines with tempting elements that lead people into incongruous content, reflecting that it only aims to entice readers to click without considering whether people will engage in their articles. Therefore, the perlocutionary acts it performs

comes before illocutionary acts. Then, the author compares non-clickbait headlines with clickbait headlines, finding that non-clickbait headlines usually provide a summary of the article. In contrast, *clickbait* headlines try to create an information gap, which means they will tell readers part, but not all, of the story. But what techniques do they use to create an information gap? Three main strategies of reverse narrative, extremes and superlatives, and forward reference, have been mentioned there. As the structure used in previous chapters, the author discusses these strategies in the order of representing definition, talking about sub-categories, and then analyzing the processes of applying corresponding strategies to achieve pragmatic functions, with examples throughout all sectors. All in all, chapter 7 involves the definition of *clickbait* and the strategies used to create information gaps are under discussion. As the author mentions in this chapter, users' curiosity is now regarded as a commodity. Therefore, the development of *clickbait* is inevitable, which makes the study of it meaningful and necessary.

As the final chapter in this book, chapter 8 presents almost every element of conducting research, like research topics, theories, methods, and ethical issues, with research methods as the focus. In the process of introducing each method, the author shows some relative research conducted by himself and other scholars and discusses their advantages and disadvantages. By doing so, the author hopes to provide a taste of how online pragmatics issues can be explored.

This book contributes a lot to developing and understanding how pragmatic processes are realized online. At first, it focuses on five commonly seen acts performed online to analyze how people realize communication in digitally mediated contexts based on Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory, which turns readers' attention from studying pragmatic offline to online and enriches these two theories by analyzing new materials. The five acts presented in this book can be frequently noticed in people's life, making the book attractive and easy to involve readers. Another contribution worth mentioning is the clear and coherent structure. In analyzing acts, this book consistently follows the order of introducing what they are first and then discussing how they complete communication from the perspective of relevance. This allows readers to get to the main points conveniently and smoothly. Besides, the summary of research methods in the last chapter is also a highlight. Readers can sense that the author shares knowledge with readers and wants to inspire and lead readers to study this field. If there is anything needed to be edited future, more attention can be paid to different languages from different platforms, not just the English materials from Twitter as applied in this book.

Generally, this book provides an insightful view of studying pragmatics online by focusing on particular acts and paves the way for future research in this field. Plenty of previous works the author mentioned in this book can also help readers expand their knowledge about pragmatics online. Given the features of creativity, practicality, and readability, all online users, learners, and researchers in pragmatics and related areas are sincerely recommended to read.

Declarations

Competing interests

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