

REVIEW

Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding. By Georgia M. Green. Pp. xii+180. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989.

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Considering the upsurge of interest in pragmatics in recent years, it may be surprising that the classic textbook of the field (Levinson 1983) still has not been supplemented by a more recent introduction taking into account the enormous advances made in pragmatic theory since the beginning of the eighties. Georgia M. Green's book *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding* would have all the benefits of finding a dry market. However, I came away from reading it with considerable disappointment. She sketches a number of interesting approaches, especially in the areas of reference and indeterminacy of sense, but as a whole her book presents pragmatic approaches and models of the seventies rather than the eighties. It is also unfortunate that she makes it very hard for her readers to follow up her sources. Because of the brevity of the book, the students would need some indication of where they can follow up the issues touched upon in this book. However, she quotes among other things a large number of unpublished American dissertations, which will be exceedingly difficult to trace, and at the same time, she fails to quote many of the standard textbooks that would be relevant for students of pragmatics (e.g. Lyons 1977, Leech 1983, Stubbs 1983, Brown and Yule 1983, Schiffrin 1986, to mention just some of the most glaring omissions).

The first chapter indicates roughly the scope of what Green wants to include under the general heading of pragmatics. Language is seen as goal-oriented action, and utterance interpretation is taken to be a process that relies heavily on contextual information and on what she calls 'mutual belief' because most natural language utterances are vague. Chapter 2 is devoted to indexicals and anaphora. In this chapter, the omission of Lyons (1977) is particularly difficult to comprehend. Considering the rapid growth of interest in this area in the last couple of years, it is also disappointing that she does not consider any more recent studies (for an up-to-date review of the relevant literature see for instance Kryk 1987).

These omissions might perhaps be excused on the grounds that the extreme brevity of the book did not allow for a more comprehensive treatment, and quite obviously no attempt has been made to present anything like a current survey of the state of the art. However, there are passages in which brevity actually distorts the facts. To mention just one example, in her discussion of the deictic function of tenses she gives the following illustrations:

- (1a) I am hungry.
- (1b) I was hungry.
- (1c) I will be hungry.

And she comments that 'if I utter (1a) at time t_0 , I mean that I am hungry at t_0 ; if I utter (1b) at t_0 , I mean that I was hungry at some point before t_0 , and if I say (1c) at t_0 , I mean that I will be hungry at some point after t_0 .' (p. 21). This is reminiscent of some traditional grammarians' belief that

English, as Latin, has got a present, a past and a future tense in order to refer to present, past and future time. It is unlikely that Green really believes this, but the way she presents this paradigm somehow suggests she might. And there is nothing to warn the unwary student of the enormous oversimplification.

In chapter 3, she discusses reference and indeterminacy of sense. I found this in many respects the most convincing chapter in spite of the fact that it suffers from the same brevity that all the other chapters are subjected to. Chapter 4 is devoted to speech acts and to presupposition.

Chapter 5 on implicature unfortunately is particularly out of date. It is based almost completely on the work by Grice and does not deal with any more recent developments in the study of implicature. Indeed Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory is worthy of only two and a half lines of one single footnote. Green may of course feel that it is premature to take a stance on relevance theory, but there is such a heated debate and so much exciting research in this field that it is a serious shortcoming not to mention the issues that are discussed. It is of course impossible to predict the outcome of these debates. In five or ten years, relevance theory might still be a thriving and developing paradigm of pragmatic research, or it may have joined generative semantics as one of the promising and controversial new fields of linguistics that turned out to be short-lived. Whatever the eventual outcome, a textbook on pragmatics published at the end of the eighties could be expected to present the relevant issues.

Green uses Grice's cooperative principle to give a new and interesting account of the notion of text coherence. She argues that coherence 'depends not on properties of the text components themselves, either individually or in relation to each other, but on the extent to which effort is required to construct a reasonable plan to attribute to the text producer in producing the text' (103). She gives the following constructed and allegedly incoherent example to illustrate her point:

"The sun climbed higher, and with its ascent the desert changed. There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. One evening, after dark, she crept away and tried to open the first gate, but swing and tug as she might she could not budge the pin." (102)

According to Green the second sentence fails to be coherent with the first because 'it is hard to imagine how a cooperative writer could expect us to infer what Lucy's attraction to fur has to do with a desert sunrise' (103). There is nothing, however, to stop the reader from assigning both sentences independent scene setting relevance whose connection might only become clear later on. The fact that the third sentence fails to be coherent with the previous two sentences lies only in the contradiction between the scene of a sun-rise given in the first and the time adverbial *one evening, after dark* in the third sentence. If the adverbial and thus the blatant (surface!) contradiction is removed, the entire passage would presumably by many readers be assumed to be coherent. So far we do not know, how the sentences add up, but the puzzle could easily be resolved in the next sentence.

"The sun climbed higher, and with its ascent the desert changed. There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. She crept away and tried to open the first gate, but swing and tug as she might she could not budge the pin. She knew that out there in the heat she would be able to smell those furs again which the hunters had brought back the previous evening."

This may not be a wonderful text but it should suffice to show that any claims for lack of coherence are extremely difficult to sustain with such short examples. There is, however, a more serious objection to Green's attempt to use Grice's cooperative principle to account for text coherence. Grice's CP is explicitly designed to account for conversational implicatures, that is to say for those aspects of meaning over and above what is 'explicitly said'. Green thus makes the implicit, and rather dubious, claim that text coherence is a matter for implicatures only. This would exclude semantic and syntactic considerations, i.e. the analysis of everything that is 'explicitly said'. This is presumably not her position, but it is inevitable if she takes the CP in the way it was formulated by

Grice seriously. If she extends the power of the pragmatic principle to such an extent that explicit content can also be handled, she would be moving a long way towards Sperber and Wilson's model of utterance interpretation. It is therefore even more difficult to understand why she completely ignored this approach.

Green also makes some rather basic terminological mistakes. Of course, every linguist is more or less free to use terminology as he or she wishes. Linguistic terms are nothing more than a convenient short hand to abbreviate complex concepts into simple terms. However, they are clearly more convenient if a large part of the professional linguistic community agrees on the use of particular terms. Textbooks have got a particular responsibility in this respect because they introduce a new generation of linguists to the tools of the trade, that is to say to the linguistic terms and what they generally stand for. One of the few facts on which linguists seem to agree is that there is a distinction between sentence type, such as interrogative, declarative and imperative, and sentence force such as questions, assertions and commands (cf Lyons 1977, Leech 1983, or almost any other standard textbook on pragmatics or semantics). It is therefore regrettable that Green describes a speech act such as *Will you (please) pass the salad* as 'question form, imperative force' (107), where the form, of course, is interrogative and the force perhaps a command or more likely a request.

Chapter 6, on the interaction between pragmatics and syntax, and chapter 7, on conversational interaction, are both extremely brief. She has many interesting examples (albeit mostly of invented data!) but her discussions of individual examples do not add up to anything like a coherent framework. And again she fails to take into account some of the standard texts. Green manages to touch most of the relevant areas in pragmatics, but many of them receive such a short shrift that her treatment distorts more than it informs. Turn-taking, for example, is discussed on a mere three and a half pages, without mentioning Levinson (1983), Stubbs (1983) or Brown and Yule (1983), and discourse particles on one page (136-7), without mentioning Schiffrin (1986).

In fact, her bibliography tells the reader a lot about her general approach and the selectiveness of her reading. John Lyons and Geoffrey Leech, who have contributed fundamental research to semantics and pragmatics, are not mentioned at all, while Noam Chomsky, who may be many things but certainly not a pragmatist, has three titles in her list of references. Moreover there are some 15 titles by herself. The journal *Linguistic inquiry*, finally, is mentioned far more often than the *Journal of pragmatics*. She relies almost entirely on American sources, and she is clearly more familiar with the literature on syntax than on pragmatics.

The sense of disappointment this reviewer experienced while reading her book was probably heightened by the sheer hope and the high expectations that I had before reading it. The most authoritative textbook on pragmatics (Levinson 1983) was largely written at the end of the previous decade. It is high time that it is supplemented by a more recent textbook which introduces students to all the exciting developments that have taken place in pragmatics in the last ten years. If you have been waiting for such a book, the book under review, sadly, is not the one you have been waiting for.

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