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# An Introduction to Pragmatics: Social Action for

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## An Introduction to Pragmatics: Social Action for Language Teach

**Virginia LoCastro (2003)**

**Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press**

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When I picked up LoCastro's *An Introduction to Pragmatics: Social Action for Language Teaching*, I would make sense of the decidedly complex matter of pragmatics. Yet, after reading this book, I was feeling that, in a world of "globalization" and greater interaction among people from diverse cultures, where, as a result, opportunities for breakdowns in communication abound, it is nothing short of a miracle to convey intended meanings at all. That I was left feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the subject in LoCastro's book. Actually, it attests to the author's incorporation of such extensive information and examples that have an impact on pragmatics.

LoCastro approaches this introduction to pragmatics in a methodical, easy to follow manner, addressing various issues with a view to helping learners be better managers of pragmatics. As the book targets a general audience, there are no assumptions of prior knowledge. There are definitions of terminology, supported by examples.

concepts, thus making the text very accessible to novices. In addition, the material is grouped in a way that allows readers to explore issues surrounding pragmatics if the book is used as a textbook. Given the topic, it follows that readers would reap greater benefit by discussing

The book contains 15 chapters comprising three sections: 1) *Basic Concepts*, 2) *Analytical Perspectives*, and 3) *Pragmatics in the Real World*. The first section, *Basic Concepts*, consists of six chapters: 1) *Introduction to Pragmatics*; 2) *Speech Act Theory*; 3) *Deixis*; 4) *Presupposition*; 5) *Implicature*; and 6) *Face, Politeness and Indirectness*. This section provides a solid foundation for understanding pragmatics in addition to exploring the problem of defining pragmatics. Val LoCastro proposes this broad one: “[P]ragmatics is the study of speaker and hearer meaning through linguistic and nonlinguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities” (p. 1).

This first section also looks at the relationship between pragmatics and linguistics. Obviously, the relationship between the two is discussed, although of greater interest is pragmatic meaning, which includes the concept of implicature. As anticipated in such a volume, deixis—using language to “point to things”—is analyzed into several forms of deictic expression: person, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse. The relationship between deixis and information structure, including schemata and how information is presented is introduced in the chapter on information structure. Corresponding cross-cultural differences are dealt with in regard to their impact on how a message is interpreted.

In *Analytical Perspectives*, the second section of the book, the three chapters deal with approaches to pragmatics. The first chapter presents a philosophical approach, where, as one would expect, one reads about the limitations of pragmatics. A sociolinguistic approach, which includes performance organization and speaker-hearer interaction, is presented in the second chapter. Finally, the third chapter presents two cognitive (psycholinguistic) approaches: relevance theory and the cognitive approach to pragmatics.

Material covered in the first two sections of the book provides the basis for the last part: *Pragmatics in the Real World*. The chapters comprising this section are really the most engaging and cover *Behavior of Listeners*; *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*; *Politeness Revisited*; *Learner Subjectivity*; and *Pragmatics in the Classroom*. LoCastro applies the concepts of pragmatics to language teaching and learning, and makes connections with research in the field of second language acquisition. Noteworthy points addressed in this section are:

- The notion of a sequence in developing pragmatic competence, suggesting an interrelated pattern may determine development. Although there are suggestions for effective teaching, these would be in light of this possible designated development of pragmatics.
- The issue of resistance to learning pragmatics. Wanting to retain one’s linguistic and cultural identity, a learner disinclined to adopt the pragmatic norms of a language.
- The adoption of “norms”. With the tremendous amount of variation in English, there is no single standard. This matter is particularly problematic given that English is not the first language for many native speakers; furthermore, it hints at the question of linguistic imperialism.
- The analysis perspective. Cultural perspectives may colour the interpretation or analysis of pragmatic norms.

systems of analysis that “[enable] the researcher to distinguish cultural differences” predominant Anglo-American frameworks of analysis.

- The level of acceptance of language mistakes. People are generally more forgiving of Therefore, to avoid reproach from an interlocutor, a non-native speaker may not wa identifies the speaker as being non-native. [-2-]
- The empowering effect of a learner’s ability to manage pragmatics. Affording learne appropriate language in order to make judicious language choices in a given situatio succeeding or not succeeding at a job interview. Providing learners with situations fo has been called “thinking and talking about pragmatics/Emetapragmatics” (McLean, able to better control aspects of their lives that depend on communication.

One area that is emphasized is the importance of having authentic models for awareness- the dearth of natural language examples, and with examples from currently used, inauthe language samples do not adequately or accurately reflect authentic language use. Language authentic, illustrating that “one distinguishing characteristic of research in pragmatics is th language as data” (p. 30). The examples LoCastro uses are drawn from a variety of langua French, Chinese and Thai. Furthermore, the many sample exchanges that are introduced around us, all the time. As a second or foreign language teacher, one might even be compo of-class opportunities for compiling language samples that would offer opportunities to d course, choosing appropriate examples requires that teachers have a thorough understand understanding is, of course, the purpose of the book.

At the end of each chapter are Discussion Questions/Tasks and a Text Analysis activity, fo and analysis activities allow one to “test” one’s understanding of the theory as well as to e classroom materials. An example task from the chapter on *Indexicality* deals with map rea deixis, the reader is asked to predict and list potential problems in giving directions or und of pragmatics will likely find the map task at an appropriate level. More challenging, thoug examples . . . and underline the rapport strategies. Suggest as detailed an analysis as you c (p. 289). The tasks and analyses appear to be correspondingly challenging for pre- and in-

While there is little to take issue with in this book, there is one remark that deserves additi pragmatics, LoCastro writes, “Generally, Americans consider their culture egalitarian and whereas other cultures are characterized by explicit marking of a hierarchical structure, w occupation, and age” (p. 238). It may be true that Americans believe they “avoid displays c studied and written about language and power, with many examples coming from English written and spoken (see online interview with Stamberg, 2003) about power displays thro choice with respect to gender, family situations and the workplace. She also cites the polit used for power. A topical, oft-cited example of late is, in fact, US President Bush’s manipu such as “empty language” and “personalization”. One columnist writes, “Take a closer loc

his political success turns out to be no surprise. It is the predictable result of the intentions (LoCastro, 2003, n.p.). Examples extend to the American media. From the war-associated notion of “collateral language” (“*lenguaje colateral*”) to describe deceptive political language used by the press, to blind the American public to the brutality of war. The purpose of the euphemism is to gain power, over American society. Thus, “American English” language may be infused with politeness in Korean, for example, where morphological markers may indicate status within a hierarchy. Power in language is, of course, grist for the pragmatist’s mill. [-3-]

The matter of language and power notwithstanding, LoCastro’s *Introduction to Pragmatics* is a topic decidedly manageable for its intended audience. Pre-service teachers will appreciate the book’s links to practice. In-service teachers will value the book as a useful reference for refreshing their knowledge. They will be grateful for their teachers’ efforts to raise awareness of an area that is increasingly important. The ease with which communication among myriad cultures and language groups has become frequent and easy. LoCastro’s book is a challenge for teachers to match this ease with the ease of effective linguistic communication.

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