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BOOK REVIEW

Review of Wharton and De Saussure (2023) *Pragmatics and Emotion*

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1. Overview

Within pragmatics, emotions have long been marginalised because they are thought to be too intangible to be captured in propositional terms, and only recently have researchers begun to recognise their role in human cognitive processes and social behaviour. *Pragmatics and Emotion* makes a valuable contribution to linguistics and affective sciences alike by offering one of the first in-depth studies on the role of emotions from the perspective of pragmatic theories.

The book consists of one introductory chapter, followed by seven chapters that first provide the readers with some historical and theoretical background, and then offer an original perspective that accounts for the role of emotion in the process of meaning production and inferencing.

2. Summary

Chapter 1 'Introduction' opens with a 'clock versus cloud' metaphor: while some communicative contents are propositional or *clock-like* (precise, easily described), others are

non-propositional or *cloud-like* (imprecise, difficult to capture in words). The emotional dimension of linguistic communication pertains to the latter, and it was long assumed that it plays a subordinate role to the rational or cognitive one. It is now time that emotions are 'put right back at the centre of research into pragmatics' (p. 3).

Chapter 2 'Pragmatics and Emotion: The Challenges' describes two challenges in accommodating emotions within pragmatic theories: (1) *description versus expression*, and (2) *proposition and ineffability*. *Description versus expression* refers to the fact that while certain propositional meanings can be described linguistically with a high level of precision ('The train leaves from platform three in ten minutes') others cannot ('For sale: Baby shoes, never worn'). Language can express emotion (poetry is a great example of this), yet it is very difficult, if not impossible, to fully describe emotions using propositional resources alone. Interjections exemplify how we tend to use different resources to describe and express emotion: we can *describe* a state of happiness by saying 'I'm happy', or we can *express* it by saying 'Yay!'. These are two different modes of conveying meaning (more conceptual the former, more expressive the latter) that produce different effects.

This brings us to the second challenge: *proposition and ineffability*. While the description of emotions can be true or false, the expression of emotion cannot. Its non-propositionality and descriptive ineffability have contributed to the sidelining of emotional communication in linguistics and related disciplines. We will meet these two challenges again in the final chapter.

The authors conclude this second chapter by introducing the theoretical framework that will accompany us throughout the book: Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, which famously combines inferential pragmatics with cognitive aspects and hence is appropriate to study emotions within a theory of pragmatics.

Chapter 3 'What is Emotion?' attempts to provide an answer to this difficult question. After discussing the contribution of Western philosophy and evolutionary biology, Wharton and de Saussure present three main theoretical approaches to emotion: Ekman's basic emotion view; the psychological-constructionist view; and the appraisal theory view. Following the authors, in this review I focus on the latter.

Appraisal theory takes it that emotions are psychological and bodily states triggered by a stimulus. As the name suggests, central to appraisal theory is the appraisal or evaluation that people make concerning the stimulus in question (is this stimulus relevant to my goals?). In light of all the above, the authors propose the following tentative definition of emotion: an emotion is a temporary or transient 'psychological state' and 'felt experience', 'directed towards objects or events in the world and connected with evaluations or appraisals of those objects or events' (p. 32). An emotion, then, involves a psychological/cognitive dimension, alongside an embodied/physical one; it is goal-oriented; and has an important evaluative element that is linked to assessments in terms of the goal relevance of a stimulus. This concept of goal relevance is reminiscent of the notion of relevance in Relevance Theory, discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 'From proto-pragmatics to pragmatics' opens with a historical discussion on the development of affective meaning within 'proto-pragmatics', that is the field of research that, between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, first paid close attention to the role of emotion in communication. The authors trace a route from Thomas Reid and Rousseau in the eighteenth century to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Bally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They dedicate particular space to Bally, who developed a theory of language use that integrates affect within a Saussurean framework. Bally's

theory anticipates contemporary cognitive pragmatics in several aspects, including the following: it proposes that language leads to action and is at the service of social life (it is a means to 'do things'); it argues that non-propositional, affective meaning is ubiquitous and contributes to assessments of relevance; and it shows that the propositional content is more often than not underspecified and hence needs to be further developed through affect and implicature. All this is of course reminiscent of speech act theory, which the authors address next. The chapter closes with a discussion of more recent attempts to integrate emotions into a theory of pragmatics, among which Scarantino's (2017) Theory of Affective Pragmatics (TAP) stands out. According to TAP, we can engage in speech act analogues via bodily emotional expressions. TAP hence, despite some limitations, (re-)positions emotions and non-verbal communication at the centre of pragmatics.

Chapter 5 'Relevance Theory, non-propositional content and ineffability' discusses Relevance Theory, arguing that it can accommodate emotional meaning, especially if combined with two key innovations: (1) the notion of *procedural meaning*; and (2) the recognition that both *showing* and meaning$_{NN}$ (in the Gricean sense) are forms of overt intentional communication.

With reference to (1), Wharton and de Saussure show that some linguistic resources do not encode concepts, but constrain the inferential process involved in constructing the speaker's intended meaning. These resources (e.g. interjections, see also Chapter 2) encode *procedural* (rather than conceptual) meaning. The notion of procedural meaning can help us deal with the challenge of *description versus expression*. Spontaneous facial expressions too should be analysed as *natural* codes (Wharton, 2003) that carry procedural information and facilitate the retrieval of emotional meaning. As for point (2), acknowledging that cases of both showing and meaning$_{NN}$ qualify as instances of ostensive-inferential communication allows us to account for the overt showing of spontaneously produced behaviours (e.g. ostensively showing spontaneous anger in one's facial expression).

The chapter concludes by elaborating on the relationship between relevance in appraisal theory (relevance$_{AFF}$) and relevance in relevance theory (relevance$_{PRAG}$). The authors see relevance$_{AFF}$ and relevance$_{PRAG}$ as two subtypes of a more general and interdisciplinary notion of goal relevance, hence bringing together affective sciences and cognitive pragmatics.

Chapter 6 'Beyond propositions' explores the notion of *affective effect*, as opposed to, and complementing, cognitive effect in Relevance Theory. Affective effects are non-propositional effects that can serve as input (*primary* affective effects) or output (*secondary* affective effects) of inferential/cognitive processes. Within primary affective effects, the authors further distinguish between *anticipatory* and *transfer* effects. Emotion can hence facilitate or follow cognitive effects, modify already existing assumptions, anticipate courses of action, generate patterns of activation in other people, etc. Since emotions often operate below the level of consciousness, they can be tools for argumentation and persuasion that are much more powerful than rational propositional contents alone.

In Chapter 7 'Emotion and evolution' the authors argue in favour of a Chomskyan Universal Grammar to explain the rich linguistic endowment with which infants seem to be born. Within a largely Gricean approach, they discuss some possible explanations of how meaning$_{NN}$ may have emerged from meaning$_{N}$ and suggest that psychologically complex mental states (e.g. the cognitive principle of relevance and meta-representational thought) might have gradually emerged from psychologically simple ones (e.g. the basic ability to

map sensory information to motor responses). They conclude by stressing that apparently simple processes (sensations, feelings, emotions) remain central to our experience of reality.

Chapter 8 'Pragmatics and emotion: the challenges revisited' summarises the notions introduced in the previous chapters. An important, albeit not new, distinction between two systems humans can use to process sensory information (a slow, rational one, and a fast, emotional one) is also given some attention. These two systems have been famously studied by Kahneman (2012), whose work on System 1 and System 2 (surprisingly not mentioned in the book) is very much in line with the claim that the system that pertains to emotions minimises effort and optimises performance, hence maximising relevance.

The authors then go back to the two challenges outlined in Chapter 2 (*description versus expression*, and *proposition and ineffability*), and to the challenge of defining 'emotion' and 'pragmatics'. We are reminded that describing and expressing an emotion are two very different things and that a theory of pragmatics must account for both. The notions of *procedural meaning* and *affective effect*, together with the recognition that communicated information can be *shown* rather than merely meant_{NN}, can help us address these two challenges. Next, the authors stress the similarity between the notion of relevance in pragmatics and in the affective sciences, which further reinforces the assumption that Relevance Theory can accommodate the emotional dimension of communication. The book concludes with a reminder that emotion and cognition are not separate dimensions and with an invitation to work toward a unified theoretical framework across disciplines from which we can all benefit.

3. Evaluation

Written at a critical point in the 'era of affectivism' (Dukes et al., 2021), *Pragmatics and Emotion* is a truly interdisciplinary work as it engages deeply with theoretical approaches from cognitive linguistics, pragmatics and affective sciences, providing the reader with new theoretical tools to analyse communicative events. The adoption of Relevance Theory, with some important innovations, is not without complexities but seems to function sufficiently well as a bridge between different yet complementary fields of research.

The book is rich in textual examples that link the theoretical aspects to language in use while at the same time making complex concepts accessible to a wider audience. I particularly appreciated the references to bodily movements, as their role in the production and inferencing of meaning is often overlooked. The authors quote many poems, songs and other pieces of art, which not only make the book a pleasure to read, but also nicely illustrate how we can be moved by a piece of writing, yet it is difficult to put into words precisely why and how that happens. The study of cross-sensory linguistic synestesia, often used in poetry, may shed further light on how we communicate ineffability.

The main limitation of this work seems to me to be the scarcity of real-world interactions and cross-linguistic evidence. The authors explicitly state that their 'primary interest is not in how languages across the world label [emotions]' because 'thought and perception depend only marginally on whether particular concepts are lexicalised' (p. 31). However, without necessarily embracing the extreme views of social constructionism and linguistic relativity, the book might have benefited from the inclusion of more detailed linguistic analyses in real-world interactions across languages. Even if we accept that thoughts and emotions exist independently of language, the reality speakers are socialised into and the

systems of representation that they acquire inevitably affect at least some aspects of their emotional experiences, for example by establishing whether a stimulus is to be positively or negatively evaluated, or by facilitating conscious awareness of internal states. Levinson and Majid's (2014) notions of *weak*, *strong* and *relative ineffability* may prove helpful in this endeavour. Moreover, we share emotions through language, and hence even if the emotional reality of the speaker is untouched by the way they verbalise it (and I am not convinced that that is actually the case), the information retrieved by the hearer certainly is not.

Evidently, it is beyond the scope of any one book to cover all the ways in which we can accommodate emotions within pragmatics, and despite the above limitations, *Pragmatics and Emotion*'s contributions are manifold. It will certainly foster the study of emotions across disciplines and is ideal for readers with an interest in the interaction of language and emotion, and anyone curious about how we produce and infer emotional meanings in interaction.

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