Book Review


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*Second Language Pragmatics: From Theory to Practice* was written as a multidisciplinary collaboration by three outstanding and prolific authors from three different countries, each of whom propounds a different perspective on the field of second language pragmatics (henceforth L2 pragmatics). The main impetus behind the book is to revitalize the field of L2 pragmatics, both theoretically and methodologically, beyond the frameworks which have been highly influenced by politeness theory and discourse completion tasks. Although the authors are appreciative of these past endeavors, they re-conceptualize L2 pragmatics and incorporate innovative postulations and methodological techniques from general pragmatics, with the intention to benefit all types of pragmatics in L2 contexts. The authors strike a brilliant balance between L2 pragmatic production and comprehension by dedicating separate and well-rounded chapters to each. This captivating publication, intended to be of great interest to a wide range of readers, consists of eight chapters, preface and acknowledgments, glossary, a reference list, and an index for subjects and names. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, chapters are organized in pairs of two, conjoined in a way where conceptual underpinnings of language production, language comprehension, and interaction are first laid out, and then their opposite methods of data collection are delineated.

The introductory chapter, “Introduction to Second Language Pragmatics,” introduces preliminary issues such as definitions, models of communicative competence, historical development, and research themes. Apropos of the definition, the authors re-conceptualize L2 pragmatic competence and add a significant dimension to the existing definitions by consolidating comprehension, production, and interaction as three pivotal constituents of L2 pragmatics. Different models of communicative competence and interactional competence, accompanied by the field of intercultural pragmatics, have influenced L2 pragmatics theoretically and methodologically. The authors maintain that
pragmatic competence deviates from “pragmatics-within-individuals,” which views language ability as a psycholinguistic trait. The authors bring to the fore “pragmatics-in-interaction-in-context,” which conceptualizes pragmatic competence from a socio-cognitive approach; that is, intercultural pragmatics, befittingly posited by Kecskes (2014), through constant negotiation and collaboration to co-construct meaning and understanding across speakers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Historically, the developments of L2 pragmatics are subsumed under four eras, which are as follows. In the comparative-descriptive or cross-sectional era (80s-90s), studies were greatly enlightened by Austin’s (1962) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. The era of the 90s and beyond was subdivided into two strands of research, including teaching and assessment research and longitudinal research. With regards to the former, a substantial bulk of the research addressed three main questions as constituting interlanguage pragmatic competence research: (1) whether and how pragmatic competence can be instructed and assessed, (2) whether instruction is more effective than no instruction, and (3) which instructional approaches and materials are more conducive to learning. With respect to the latter, inasmuch as the acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence is a long-term process involving an intricate interplay between language, language users, and contexts of interaction, the number of developmental studies witnessed a gradual and considerable increase during this period. The era of the 2000s and beyond, known for the application of SLA theories to L2 pragmatics research and teaching, sought to answer what mechanisms drive pragmatic development. This era is also noted for embarking upon the noticing hypothesis, skill acquisition theories, language socialization theory, interaction approach, and dynamic systems theory. L2 pragmatics research today, the fourth era, pertains to “pragmatics-in-interaction-in-context,” encompassing such concepts as interactional competence, intercultural pragmatics, and discursive pragmatics impacted by globalization, internationalization, and English as a lingua franca (ELF). The chapter presents an unprecedented list of questions, some of which remain thought-provoking for novice students, while the rest can be considered a rich repertoire of studies in L2 pragmatics focusing roughly on four areas of investigation: constructs and methodology, development, individual factors, and contextual factors.

Although the authors appreciate the foundational works including Levinson’s (1983) Pragmatics and Leech’s (1983) Principles of Pragmatics, they contend in chapter two, “Language Production: Conceptual Background,” that the definitions in these works are somewhat lacking, as they do not entail situational, cultural, and cognitive contexts inasmuch as pragmatics gives credence to indeterminacy. Moreover, the chapter criticizes the demarcation between two views of pragmatics—a micro perspective, or the Anglo-American view of pragmatics that embodies
references, deixis, speech acts, implicatures, and inferences, and the macro perspective, or the *Continental European view of pragmatics* characterized by general, cognitive, social, and cultural features – as seemingly over-simplistic. Pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics are also discussed in terms of how blurred they may be theoretically and methodologically, particularly when politeness comes in. The authors articulate the problems with L2 speech act analyses and further argue that although Brown and Levinson (1987) model of politeness undoubtedly serves as a yardstick for researchers for its comprehensiveness, thoroughness, and level of argumentation, the model “is often applied in an overly mechanical, unthinking way” (p. 44). With consideration to social variables and context, the model confines context to a handful of social variables such as distance, relative power, and absolute ranking and, thereby, underplaying the impact of such other factors as rights and obligations, the presence of a third party, formality, and mood.

The third chapter, “Data Elicitation Methods in L2 Pragmatic Production,” opens with the ethical and confidentiality concerns in L2 pragmatics data collection. The chapter primarily encapsulates how pragmatic production – mainly speech acts, routines, speech styles, and address forms – has been elicited and analyzed. The chapter also describes three types of data collection tools predominantly capitalized upon in L2 pragmatics research: (1) discourse completion tasks (DCTs), which are further categorized into written DCTs, spoken DCTs, technology-enhanced DCTs, reverse DCTs, and collaborative DCTs; (2) role plays which can be open, closed, spontaneous, or structured and can be operationalized face-to-face, via chat, by phone or video, or via virtual reality; and (3) recording of authentic data which encompasses the elicitation of natural language production through diaries and field notes. The authors point out that these methods of data collection have strengths and limitations which need to be taken into account depending on the purposes of the study and research questions. Additionally, this chapter includes follow-up activities, which can be quite fruitful and practical for the reader.

Chapter four, “Language Comprehension and Awareness: Conceptual Background,” puts a premium upon the hearer and the processes involved in constructing meaning. The chapter elaborates on the logical inferencing required to conceive Grice’s (1989) Cooperative Principle (CP) and its componential maxims as well as conversational implicature. The authors leveled some criticisms against CP on the grounds that it seems to prescribe that interlocutors talk in such a way that they cooperate with each other, called information cooperation. In contrast, the authors feel the maxims should be regarded as assumptions, not prescriptions. It is postulated that utterances infringing on the maxims encourage the hearer to seek cooperation at a deeper level and perceive the implicature. In
addition, this chapter eloquently articulates the associative processes (background knowledge or mental schema) deployed to consolidate our understanding of what people say by generating shared contextual assumptions. Additionally, the authors enunciate two principles of Relevance Theory – the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance – which both seem indispensable to enrich our understanding. In this chapter the authors connect appropriateness, with concurrent orientations to both social oughts and habits, to politeness. Finally, a distinction is made between explicit and implicit metapragmatics as indicators of pragmatic reflexive awareness, proclaiming that most studies on implicit metapragmatics have probed into metapragmatic knowledge, overlooking in situ metapragmatic awareness.

The fifth chapter, “Data Elicitation Methods in L2 Pragmatic Comprehension and Awareness,” outlines the merits and demerits of an array of data collection techniques as well as the measurement of pragmatic recognition, comprehension, and awareness of appropriate pragmalinguistic forms in context. Multiple-choice tests, the most extensively employed tasks in L2 pragmatics comprehension, were first deployed to assess the comprehension of different types of implicature and were later tailored strategically to assess speed of comprehension. Aligned with the introduction of measurement techniques for L2 pragmatic knowledge in receptive skills, this chapter delineates spoken and written tasks and methods to assess metapragmatic knowledge and awareness of sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic forms, as follows: (1) questionnaire-based methods, including scaled-response items to rate the degree of appropriateness and fixed-response items for the recognition of pragmatic expressions; (2) metapragmatic discussions, interviews, and introspective and retrospective verbal protocols; and (3) diaries, journals, and blogs.

Putting a spotlight on the speaker and the hearer simultaneously in the interactive process to derive meaning, the sixth chapter, “Interaction: Conceptual Background,” lays out the theoretical framework for interactional pragmatics, pinpointing the indeterminacy of meaning and its dynamic construction. In so doing, the chapter highlights that making a hard and fast distinction between etic and emic approaches to research in social science cannot be straightforward. It is noted that L2 pragmatics research was traditionally rooted in the etic approach, yet the pendulum has recently swung towards emic approaches, including “discursive pragmatics” and “interactional pragmatics.” From the emic vantage point and as regards politeness, the chapter fleshes out three foundational areas of interactional pragmatics. First, the authors elaborate on contexts, which are mutually constructed, dynamic, and reflexive. Next the chapter describes the co-acts, arguing that meanings emerge in the flow of interaction drawing on co-construction of acts and sequentiality. Finally, activity
types, which are culture-specific and dynamic, are presented to discuss how they play a paramount role in decoding and constructing meaning during interaction. The chapter succinctly touches upon the multimodality of data collection, noting that “most pragmatics research lacks multimodal data analyses of language exchanges during interaction” (p. 160).

Articulating the underexplored strands of research in interactional pragmatics, chapter seven, “Data Elicitation Methods in L2 Pragmatic Interaction,” illuminates elicited and semi-authentic interactive data collection methods. Embarking on role-play as the most suitable method of data elicitation, the chapter presents interaction approaches to role-play, drawing mainly on open role-play and implicit vs explicit pragmatic feedback, and conversation analytic approaches to role-play, utilizing conversation analysis-informed assessment, applied conversation analysis, and interaction-sensitive, conversation analysis-driven criteria. Furthermore, the chapter introduces elicited conversation, confederate scripting, naturalist conversation, computer-mediated communication, and corpus approaches as other methods of data collection along with their advantages and caveats.

Recapitulating the previous chapters, the concluding chapter calls attention to mixed methods research, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data-driven approaches in order to have a thorough impression of the acquisition of L2 pragmatic features. It is suggested that prospective researchers conduct longitudinal research in tune with the methodological paradigm shift – such as integrative pragmatics – using innovative data collection tools.

Though the book is extensive in its treatment of L2 Pragmatics, we believe a few areas deserved more attention. In the first chapter, the authors foregrounded the mainstream theoretical underpinnings for L2 pragmatics research, and even though they mentioned “skill acquisition theory”, they failed to pay justice to it and left it with no explanation. Moreover, being inspired by SLA cognitive theories and in tune with the theoretical conceptualizations, we suggest that amid the myriad of theoretical foundations for L2 pragmatics, Bialystok’s (1993) two-dimensional model of L2 proficiency development or linguistic processing and Sharwood Smith’s (1981) consciousness-raising deserve room and should have been taken into account in interlanguage pragmatics studies. Additionally, with respect to instructional intervention, the authors focused primarily on dichotomous teaching approaches, namely explicit vs implicit and role-play. We suggest that other innovative methodological techniques, such as interactive translation, form-search, etc., that are most conducive to learning, need to be considered. We also believe if the book had incorporated a section of possible recommendations for future research as well as more pedagogical and hands-on experience activities, course instructors may be much more inclined to draw on them while
making their students more conscious of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features. Finally, regarding the layout of the book, it is recommended that future editions of the volume include a list of abbreviations so that the readers can keep track of the terminologies.

Despite these criticisms, Second Language Pragmatics: From Theory to Practice is an exceptionally valuable asset to the field, reviewing the existing methodologies and putting forward innovative methodologies along with their appropriate data collection methods for production and comprehension, an almost overlooked side of the continuum. From our standpoint, the book seems to have fulfilled its promises by laying out the methodological and epistemological viewpoints of many scholars and making reference to the latest developments in L2 pragmatics. The book is written in a reader-friendly and easy-to-follow fashion with tangible examples, insightful discussion questions, illustrations and whimsical cartoons, and a handy glossary, making it perfect for students, instructors, and novice and seasoned researchers alike. It is organized thematically with each chapter written so that it can be read independently. Each chapter enjoys a brief introduction through which the authors encapsulate the main points and strive to pave the way for the readers to smoothly proceed through subsequent discussions. The book has many side boxes which serve to clarify the fundamental points and incorporate and dissect the germane studies and/or theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter serve to broaden, deepen, and consolidate the readers' knowledge. All in all, Second Language Pragmatics: From Theory to Practice is of exquisite quality, making it, undoubtedly, one of the most invaluable recent publications within the realm of L2 pragmatics.

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References


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